Mapping the Realities of First Year Post-Secondary Life: A Study of Students at Three Post-Secondary Institutions

Prepared for:

The British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY **1**

PURPOSE 1
OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH LITERATURE ON ATTRITION, RETENTION, AND STUDENT SUCCESS 1
THE SAMPLE 6
METHOD 7
ACTION RESEARCH 7
  Historical Background *8*
  Defining Action Research *9*
  Action Research in Education *10*
  "Mapping the Realities . . ." Definition of Action Research *10*

1. MAPPING REALITIES AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE **12**

THE INSTITUTION 12
  Services and Strategies for Student Success *12*
THE SAMPLE 14
  Research Project Participants *14*
RESULTS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE FOCUS GROUPS 15
I. THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE 15
  Choice of College *15*
  Reasons for Going to College *16*
  The Need to Succeed *17*
  Family and College: Balancing Demands *18*
  Student Orientation *20*
II. THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE 21
  Student Expectations About the Part-time Program *21*
  Pace of the Courses *22*
  Relationships with Instructors *23*
  Group Work *24*
III. THE CAMPUS EXPERIENCE 25
  College Administration and Staff *25*
  Parking *25*
  Registration *26*
CONCLUSION 27

2. PERSONNEL INTERVIEWS AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE **28**

BACKGROUND 28
SAMPLE 28
RESULTS 28
I. DEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS 28
II. STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES 32
III. RESPONSIBILITY 35
IV. RESEARCH AND EVALUATION 36
V. FURTHER EFFORTS TO ENSURE STUDENT SUCCESS 38
VI. CURRENT TRENDS 39
  Tuition Rates *40*
  High Unemployment *41*
  Burgeoning Enrollments *42*
  Emergence of the University Colleges *43*
  University of Northern British Columbia *43*

Conclusion 44

3. MAPPING REALITIES AT A UNIVERSITY COLLEGE 45

The University College 45
  Programs Promoting "Student Success" 46
  Courses for "Student Success" 46
The Sample 46
Results of the University College Focus Group 48
I. Educational Choices and Life Choices 49
  Reasons for Participating in the Action Research 49
  The Purpose of Education and Relationship to Selection of Institution 49
  Student Success and the Institution's Reputation 50
  Accessibility of Institution 51
II. Acquiring Voice to Overcome Barriers to Access Resources for Success 52
  Resources for Success 52
  Library 52
  Writing Centre 54
III. Transition into the Academic Experience 56
  High School Expectations vs. College Expectations 56
  Expectations and Quality of Work 58
  Plagiarism 59
  Stress 59
  Perceptions of Teachers/Instructors/Professors 60
IV. Looking Back and Looking Forward: Assessing the Academic Experience 62
  Students' Perception of the First Year 62

4. UNIVERSITY COLLEGE PERSONNEL FINDINGS 65

Background 65
Sample 65
I. Perceptions of Success 66
  Student Success and the Institution 66
  Student Success as Career 67
  Student Success in Relation to the Personal and to Society 68
II. Perceptions of Retention 69
  Relationship between Students and Faculty 71
III. The "Personal Touch" and Student Success "Programming" 72
  "Providing a Home" 74
  Socialization: A Sense of Belonging 75
IV. Institutional Evaluation 76
V. Other Influential Trends 78
  Tuition 78
  Unemployment 78
  University Colleges 79
Conclusion 80

5. MAPPING REALITIES AT A UNIVERSITY 81

The University 81
Resources to Promote Student Success 81
The Sample 82
I. The Academic Experience 82
A. Academic Achievement in First Year 83
  High school / University Transition 83
  Failing in First Year 83
B. Faculty Relationships with Students 85

Student Advisors 86
Rapport with Teachers 87
Inconsistency Across Different Sections of the Course 87
Classroom Behaviour by Instructors 89
Instructors' Credentials, Quality of Teaching, and Evaluation of Teaching 90
II. THE CAMPUS EXPERIENCE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM 91
Campus Services and Resources 92
Cultural Concerns/Racism 94
Residence Life 95
III. EDUCATIONAL CHOICES, LIFE CHANCES, AND THE FUTURE 95
Individual vs. Institutional Responsibility for Student Success 98
CONCLUSION 99

6. PERSONNEL INTERVIEWS AT A UNIVERSITY **100**

BACKGROUND 100
SAMPLE 100
I. PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS AND RETENTION 100
II. A COLLABORATIVE ENDEAVOUR 104
III. SENSE OF COMMUNITY 107
IV. STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAMS AND SERVICES 113
V. EVALUATION 118
VI. UNIVERSITY ACCESS 120
CONCLUSION 123

DISCUSSION **124**

CONCLUSION **125**

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE **126**

RECOMMENDATIONS **127**

REFERENCE LIST **129**

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OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Purpose

The purpose of the study described in this report was to examine first year post-secondary experiences of students through an action research project with small groups of students at three post-secondary institutions (one community college, one university college, and one university). Kemmis (1983) describes action research as "a systematic process of collaborative review and improvement of educational or social policies, programs, and practices. It is participatory, collaborative, practice-based and action-oriented, concretely critical, self-reflective and emancipatory" (p.146). The intent of action research is to involve the "practitioners," students in this study, in a research project concerning their affairs. This approach is meant to "overcome the passiveness of the research process by turning research itself into a transformative activity" (Tesch, 1990, p. 66).

An action research design allows the researcher to enter into a collaborative relationship with the interviewees. This approach has the following advantages: 1) students work collectively with each other and with the researcher to define the problems and generate strategies to address them; 2) student participants learn empowering strategies to enable them to be successful in their post-secondary endeavours; and 3) an action research strategy contributes to theory development, the body of research on retention and success in post-secondary institutions, policy formulation, and the well-being of the participants (Mishler, 1986).

Overview of the Current Research Literature on Attrition, Retention, and Student Success

Most of the work on post-secondary attrition, retention and student success has been grounded on a theoretical model of persistence/dropout developed by Tinto (1975, 1987). Based on this model, persistence and withdrawal behaviour by students has been described as the degree of "fit" between students and their institutional environments (see Figure 1).

According to this model, students arrive at a given institution with a range of personal characteristics (*e.g.,* sex, ethnicity), family and community of origin characteristics (*e.g.,*family socioeconomic status, size of community), skills (*e.g.,*intellectual and social), value orientations, achievements, and experiences from prior schooling (*e.g.,*academic ability, secondary school achievement). Each of these characteristics affects the individual's initial formulation of intentions and commitments (T_1 in Tinto's model) about future educational activities.

Individual characteristics, initial intentions, and commitments influence subsequent experiences within the institution. In turn, these determine the individual's integration into the institution. According to Tinto (1975, p. 96),

> given individual characteristics, prior experiences, and commitments . . . it is the individual's integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his [her] continuance at that college.

The extent to which academic integration occurs is determined by academic performance and level of intellectual development. Social integration is a result of the quality of peer group interactions and the quality of student interactions with faculty. Levels of social and academic integration lead to second order commitments (T_2 in Tinto's model) toward the institution and graduation. The higher one's level of institutional and goal commitment, the more likely she or he is to persist at the institution.

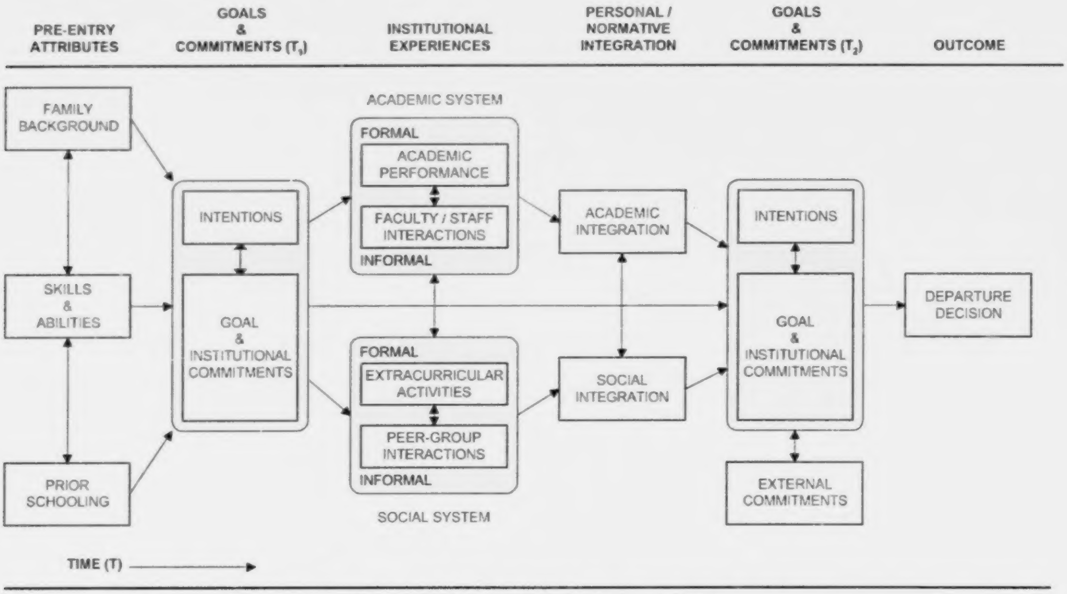
PRE-ENTRY ATTRIBUTES
GOALS & COMMITMENTS (T1)
INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCES
PERSONAL / NORMATIVE INTEGRATION
GOALS & COMMITMENTS (T2)
OUTCOME
FAMILY BACKGROUND
SKILLS & ABILITIES
PRIOR SCHOOLING
INTENTIONS
GOAL & INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS
ACADEMIC SYSTEM
FORMAL
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE
FACULTY / STAFF INTERACTIONS
INFORMAL
FORMAL
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES
PEER-GROUP INTERACTIONS
INFORMAL
SOCIAL SYSTEM
ACADEMIC INTEGRATION
SOCIAL INTEGRATION
INTENTIONS
GOAL & INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS
EXTERNAL COMMITMENTS
DEPARTURE DECISION
TIME (T)

Figure 1. A model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1987)

Tinto's model has spawned a multitude of research activities. Using Tinto's theoretical formulation, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) developed five scales to assess Tinto's conceptions of academic and social integration. These scales include the following:

I. Peer Group Interactions
II. Interactions with Faculty
III. Faculty Concerns for Student Development and Teaching
IV. Academic and Intellectual Development
V. Institutional and Goal Commitments

In a study conducted at Syracuse University, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) reported that these five scales significantly discriminated first year persisters from voluntary dropouts. The Institutional and Goal Commitments scale contributed most to group discrimination; the Interactions with Faculty scale was second in importance. Using the classification procedure in discriminant function analysis, 82% of the sample were correctly classified as persisters or dropouts.

In Canada, Gilbert, Evers, and Auger (1989), in a project entitled Career and Educational Achievement in the Student Environment (CEASE), employed longitudinal student data from the University of Guelph. The researchers used Tinto's model to determine the characteristics of those who persist, transfer, leave the system, and are required to withdraw. They confirmed the usefulness of Tinto's model, particularly academic and social involvement, in explaining what happens to students subsequent to university enrolment. They also concluded that it is important to distinguish among types of leavers when considering persistence/withdrawal behaviour[1].

Researchers adopting various forms of Tinto's model have examined community college students' predisposition to transfer (Nora & Rendon, 1990), retention of ethnic groups (Nora, 1987), and specific constructs of the model such as faculty-student contacts (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella, 1980) and predictors of social and academic integration (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). In general, these studies confirm Tinto's thesis that the fit between the individual and the institution is a good predictor of dropout or persistence.

Other studies, although not following Tinto's framework, have shown that goal commitment plays a role in persistence. For example, Kinnick and Kempner (1988) monitored bachelors degree completion among students commencing their studies at two-year and four-year institutions ten years previous. They found that, of those who commenced their studies at a community college, the majority reported clear goals when entering the community college. Half had initiated formal contact with someone at a four year institution early in their community college career, 75% had completed rigorous programs of study at the community college level, most came from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and most were very involved in college life. Those who commenced studies at a community college but did not complete a bachelors degree did not share these characteristics.

Findings of studies based on the model of persistence and withdrawal as conceptualized by Tinto and operationalized by Pascarella and Terenzini, Gilbert *et al.,* and others, have been used by institutional researchers and planners to assess the fit (or mismatch) between students' initial expectations and actual experiences. By focussing on various dimensions in the model, interventions have been designed to encourage student persistence, thereby preventing potentially wasted resources associated with post-secondary attrition.

This model and its variations have been widely adopted and have produced a multitude of studies. The work by Pascarella and Terenzini, Bean and Metzner, Gilbert and others is well known. However, some of the models included under the rubric of "College Impact of Student Change" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) are relevant for a young (*e.g.,* the 18-24 year old) residential student population. Also, empirical studies based on these models usually focus on four year university students and assume full-time attendance. To a much lesser degree, variations of Tinto's model have been devised to assess persistence/withdrawal behaviour of "non-traditional students"[2] (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987). As predicted,

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[1] Types of leavers included those who 1) transferred to other universities, 2) transferred to community colleges, 3) left the system, and 4) were required to withdraw. Discriminating variables used in the analysis were much better at predicting leavers than transfers to other institutions.

[2] Bean and Metzner (1985) define the non-traditional student as "older than 24, does not live in a campus residence (*e.g.,* is a commuter), or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and is chiefly concerned with the institution's academic offerings (especially courses, certification and degrees)" (p. 489).

Metzner and Bean (1987) found that social integration variables were not significant with this group. However, grade point average and commitment to the institution directly affected dropout, utility (*e.g.*, usefulness of a post-secondary education in gaining employment), satisfaction, and opportunity to transfer. Age influenced dropout through intention to leave. McLaren (1990), in a study examining British Columbia male adults' long-term persistence at university, reported similar findings.

However, models included under the rubric of "College Impact of Student Change" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) are limiting (O'Neil, Meeker, & Borgers, 1978; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Voorhees, 1987; Ethington, 1990; Johnson, 1991; Stahl & Pavel, 1992). Originally designed to assess persistence patterns of a young (*e.g.*, the 18-24 year old) residential student population, theoretical developments and empirical studies usually focus on four year university students and assume full-time attendance. As such, they disregard the demographic heterogeneity of today's student population. Demographic profiles of post-secondary students in the 1990s reveal that "non-traditional" students of the past are now an integral part of the mainstream student population (Gilley & Hawkes, 1989; Hybertson, Hulme, Smith & Dolton, 1992; Puccio, 1995; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992; Rotkis & McDaniel, 1993). Historically, the "traditional" university student means male and white (Andres Bellamy & Guppy, 1991; Axelrod, 1990). Although variations of Tinto's model have been devised to assess persistence/withdrawal behaviour of "non-traditional students" (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987), these models remain peripheral and continue to deal with the "other."

Moreover, these models locate individuals within the post-secondary institution and emphasize the effectiveness of the individual to integrate socially and academically into the institution. As Benjamin and Hollings (1995) point out, this disregards the complexity of students' lived lives. To address these limitations, research and model development have incorporated other factors – both within and outside post-secondary institutions -- which impact on students' lives. One such approach, by O'Neil, Meeker and Borgers (1978) outlines eight risk factors affecting persistence/retention and voluntary or involuntary withdrawal. These include factors related to family, society, preparation, situation, institution/program, psychosocial/emotional, socioeconomic, and the individual. Johnson (1991) has extended those factors included as exogenous to include disadvantage and outside community support.

Most recently, a Quality of Student Life (QSL) model has been advanced by Benjamin (1994) and Benjamin and Hollings, (1995). This model, which has as its roots an ecological model of student satisfaction, endeavours to capture the complex and multileveled nature and multidetermined outcomes of students' lives. It contextualizes the student experience by acknowledging and incorporating individual, institutional, and extra-institutional dimensions into the model. Benjamin (1994) indicates that Quality of Student Life involves the following eight components: satisfaction, happiness, multiple life domains, short-term past, objective circumstances, institutional circumstances, psychosocial factors, and meaning structures (p.228). One of these components -- multiple life domains – is further decomposed to include factors such as social, finances, individual, living arrangements, academic, university services, gender, and university administration.

As such, the QSL model is an attempt to reconnect individuals to their environments and situations, hence extending previous work on student post-secondary life. Its attention to complexity and deliberate lack of parsimony makes QSL a useful heuristic which holds potential for identifying salient factors impacting levels of student satisfaction within post-secondary institutions.

In summary, model development has advanced to the point of acknowledging that attention to the multiple contexts within which students operate is critical and that individuals, environments, and situations must remain analytically intact. Also, the relationship between the complexity of post-secondary institutions and the quality of students' experiences is recognized. Furthermore, multiple societal institutions are deemed to impact on students' experiences within post-secondary institutions.

However, to date, existing theoretical models and empirical analyses have not addressed the dynamic relationship between students as agents within societal institutions and institutions as living structures which impact on the lives of students. The relationship between structure and agency has been long acknowledged in the sociological literature (Archer, 1982; Coleman, 1986; Giddens, 1984; Kerckhoff, 1976; Wharton, 1991). Agents (*i.e.,* students) enter post-secondary institutions enabled or constrained by varying levels of competencies, resources, and strategies. As such, they are not without 'engines of action' who are completely constrained and shaped by their environment. However, students also encounter people, policies and practices within societal institutions including post-secondary institutions, family, and work that enable or constrain their ability to integrate socially and academically and to achieve their educational goals. As Bourdieu (1991) indicates, educational institutions can be conceptualized as a "field" within the multidimensional space of the social world. A given institution and the people it them create a *field of forces* and a *field of struggles* which tends to transform or conserve the field as a field of forces (Bourdieu, 1991; Harker, 1990). Students are defined by their *relative positions* in this space; that is, relative to faculty, staff, resources, policies, and practices of a given post-secondary institution. Students' relative positions are also defined by other relevant "fields," such as family and work. Hence, occupants of various positions in the field are oriented, through the network of relations among the positions, to the strategies which may be implemented in their struggles to ameliorate their positions.

In other words, we assert that it is time to take the next step in understanding the post-secondary student experience. This requires an approach to research that permits exploration of the agency-structure nexus.

A recent study of the expectations and experiences of post-secondary education in British Columbia illustrated the limitations of such an approach to issues of retention. As part of the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training, and Technology's *Client Survey Project* (1992), Andres Bellamy conducted focus group sessions with first year students at five post-secondary institutions in British Columbia[3]. The focus group discussions, through students' "voices," were intended to provide a detailed portrayal of the first year post-secondary student experience. In total, 34 individuals participated in one-time focus group discussions. Sessions were comprised of 19 (56%) women and 15 (44%) men. Each meeting was approximately two hours long. Several key issues emerged in relation to retention and attrition in, and satisfaction with post-secondary participation, including: injustice of the student financial aid system, difficulty in accessing information about the post-secondary system, problems in accessing post-secondary programs, and limited academic and career counselling. Although the 1992 focus group sessions provided students the opportunity to identify various obstacles to post-secondary participation and provided some valuable insights, a more in depth study was required to understand how students survive and thrive in their first year of post-secondary study. Based on this experience, the study "Mapping the Realities of First Year Post-Secondary Life: A Study of Students at Three Post-secondary Institutions" was proposed.

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[3] Focus groups were held at the University of British Columbia, University College of the Cariboo, Northern Lights College (Fort St. John), College of New Caledonia, and Selkirk College (Castlegar). See Andres (1991) for the complete report.

The intent of the project was to involve the "practitioners," the students, in a project concerning their affairs. The research goals were as follows: 1) to identify and recognize today's students, 2) to determine the impact of multiple realities and roles (including school, work, home, and family) on success in the post-secondary system, and 3) to articulate the importance of these for student success.

The Sample

Given the diversity of students within individual post-secondary institutions, each group was strategically recruited to reflect the interests of the participating institution (and the interests of the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer). A detailed description of each group is provided in each relevant section of this report. Table 1 provides a summary of the total sample, frequency of focus group meetings, and total number of interviews conducted with post-secondary personnel at each site.

Table 1
Frequency of Focus Group Meetings

	Community College[4]		University College	University
No. of participants	4	4	8	5
Focus Groups Meetings	4	5	15	5
Interviews with College Personnel	5		12	8

Method

Throughout the first semester of the 1993 academic year, weekly meetings were held with the same group of 5-8 students at each of the three institutions 1) to discuss how institutional policies, programs, and practices of the post-secondary system (including those of the particular post-secondary institution, the Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, and other relevant institutional structures) facilitate or constrain successful completion of studies and 2) to explore which resources and strategies are or could be used by students to survive and thrive in the system. Students were asked to keep detailed journals of their experiences in the post-secondary system. This study also included interviews with individuals from the counselling departments, administration, instructional units, and other key institutional structures.

In addition, research assistants held three face-to-face team meetings to share experiences and learn from each other, and three teleconferences were held with the principal investigator.

To situate the study in context and highlight its characteristics, action research as a methodology is described in the next section.

Action Research

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[4] The two groups at the community college site are treated as one for analytical purposes.

An action research design is employed in this study. In this section, we review this method and highlight its utility in analyzing the effects of institutional policies, resources, and strategies that facilitated or constrained student success. Before defining action research, a brief history of its evolution and definitions is provided.

Historical Background

Although its precise origins are under debate, action research has been practised and described as a distinctive method of inquiry for approximately 50 years (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Ledford & Mohrman, 1993). A few early researchers have made significant contributions to action research through their explorations for resolving social problems.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, scientifically controlled experimental research was the accepted method of the day. However, experimental social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, known as the father of action research, is credited with introducing of action research for initiating social change through group problem-solving. It was "an antidote to individualism and expertise separated from people" (Weisbord, 1987, p. 70).

Throughout his career, Lewin advocated helping people find meaning in their work through novel problem-solving and "doing by learning" (Weisbord, 1987, p. 7). He turned research into action (labour/work practices) and action into research (social experiments). Lewin believed problems could be solved by studying the action process to refine theory and inform change (Weisbord, 1987). Lewin's ideas culminated in his belief that "research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, 1946, p. 203). This was later translated into the axiom "no action without research and no research without action" (Weisbord, 1987) and Elden and Chisholm's statement that "knowledge without action is meaningless" (1993, p. 122).

Before the mid-1950s action research had been used primarily in human relations, the workplace, and in promoting social democratic change. Collier (1945) employed an action research approach to improve governmental relations with North American Indians, using research as a "tool of action" in the process. Another significant contribution was made by Trist and Bamforth (1951) in their studies of coal miners and the use of social science knowledge for problem solving in small self-regulating work teams. Also, Coch and French's 1948 classic empirical field experiment that examined misconceptions about women workers added significantly to the action research literature (Elden & Chishol, 1993; Heller, 1993; Weisbord, 1987).

During the 1950s, Stephen Corey, Dean of Teachers' College at Columbia University in New York, sought to apply the principles of action research to education (Corey, 1953; Elden & Chisholm, 1993; McKay, 1991). Corey's goal was to promote improvement in practice for teachers and administrators through their reflective action to meet future demands of a changing technological society (Corey, 1953; McKay, 1991). Corey sought to enhance relationships and build trust within the system by encouraging teachers to improve their teaching through analysis, cooperation, collaboration, discussion, and reflection by taking part in the change process (Corey, 1953; McKay, 1991).

By 1960, action research on educational topics was replaced by curriculum development and evaluation as a form of inquiry in education (Kemmis, 1983). Action research succumbed to the tenets of the scientific method and hence was seen as a less rigorous research method and limited in scope; thus, it fell out of favour during the 1970s. However, during the 1980s, it gained prominence for change in education in England and Australia (McKay, 1991). Kemmis (1983) attributed this rebirth to the acknowledgment that there are no grounds for a technology of education to which underlying principles of human behaviour could be applied. Furthermore, problems of curriculum and the organization of education have been reconceptualized to make room for participatory research and evaluation (Kemmis, 1983). Finally, educational science, like the other social sciences, required new approaches to explain epistemological foundations (Kemmis, 1983). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, action research has seen a rebirth as a collaborative action research methodology for social change with policy implications for organizational, community, and educational contexts. Action research provides a forum for linking science, knowledge, action, and policy together within real social situations.

Defining Action Research

Action research is defined as

> a cyclical inquiry process that involves diagnosing a problem situation, planning action steps, and implementing and evaluating outcomes. Evaluation leads to diagnosing the situation anew based on learnings from the previous activities cycle. A distinctive feature of AR is that the research process is carried out in collaboration with those who experience the problem or their representatives. The main idea is that action research uses a scientific approach to study important organizational or social problems together with the people who experience them. Conventional social science aims at producing new knowledge by solving scientific problems. Action research adds solving practical problems to create new general knowledge. (Elden & Chisholm, 1993, p. 124)

The definition extended investigation into different types of problems, "research methods and designs, relations between researchers and research 'subjects,' and in questions about the nature of scientific inquiry in transforming social systems" (Elden & Chisholm, 1993, p.122). The literature suggests four contexts for conducting action research: business and organizations, community, national or public policy, and educational research. These contexts extend and expand the dimensions of action research beyond the original definition.

Five dimensions are present to some degree within all action research: it 1) addresses practical problems within a framework of understanding that contribute to problem-solving and general knowledge; 2) may be applied to different contexts and is not bound by one specific or particular discipline, but grounded in the participants' understanding; 3) is based on and follows the principles of scientific inquiry; 4) allows active involvement of participants to varying degrees in the research process; and 5) seeks, like conventional science, to contribute findings to general knowledge (Elden & Chisholm, 1993).

Additional components may be incorporated. For example, contemporary action research includes a dynamic, self-generated, and sustained process of ongoing change and learning as a goal within a social context over time. Today, active participant involvement is seen as a crucial component in the process. Moreover, participants, as active and influential co-researchers, can generate knowledge through empirical inquiry based on their understanding and explanation of perceived categories and frameworks. Their participation is deemed essential for new learning and change to transpire through the diffusion of knowledge (Elden & Chisholm, 1993).

Action Research in Education

With the rebirth of interest in action research in education, it has become a widely accepted methodology to hypothesize, interpret, and problem-solve while seeking alternate methods for enhancing the understanding of educational issues and dynamics (Kemmis, 1983). For example, in relation to teaching, action research is

> trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school, and better articulation and justification of the educational rationale for what goes on. . . . A distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on a course of action which seems likely to lead to improvement, and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982, p. 41, cited in McKay, 1991, p. 2)

According to Carr and Kemmis (1986), for action research as a critical educational science to take control of education, collaborative inquiry for the development and reform of education must be directed by self-critical communities of those directly concerned with education: teachers, parents, students, administrators, and researchers. Action research provides a positive avenue for empowerment, engagement, creativity, and generation of new knowledge for discarding the bonds of restrictive legislation, bureaucratization, and isolation (McKay, 1991).

The potential of action research in education is as yet untapped. However, inroads have been made for initiating change in teaching and educational policies. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986), critical educational action research must meet five criteria: 1) be dialectical; 2) employ interpretive categories; 3) provide a framework for analyzing influences of ideological conditions; 4) link reflection to action; and 5) analyze the relationship of theory to practice. Ultimately, this means action research must involve the participants directly in all stages of the research process.

"Mapping the Realities . . ." Definition of Action Research

"Mapping the Realities of First Year Post-Secondary Life: A Study of Students at Three Post-Secondary Institutions" is one attempt to tap the potential of action research in education. In the research project, a common definition of the process was necessary to establish a common context among three very different researchers and participant groups at three diverse institutions: a community college, a university college, and a university. Although numerous definitions for action research abound, for this project the researchers adopted Kemmis' (1983) educational or social action research meaning as

> a systematic process of collaborative review and improvement of educational or social policies, programs and practices. . . . It is participatory, collaborative, practice-based and action-oriented, concretely critical, self-reflective and emancipatory. (p. 146-147)

Kemmis' meaning encompasses the multiple facets of the inquiry process found at the three different sites. The researchers' intent was that the group members participate collaboratively in the project based on their interests as first year students. As co-researchers, they identified issues that concerned them about their personal lives and/or the institution, program, practices, resources, and the policies that hindered or enhanced their experiences.

In the spirit of action research, each student was encouraged to keep a weekly journal to help her or him reflect on dilemmas. Common issues were discussed in weekly or bi-weekly focus groups where students participated in seeking solutions, offering alternatives, and confirming current strategies. From the outset, issues emerged and continued to unfold throughout the study. Researchers kept focus group meetings flexible to accommodate student exams and assignment dates. Although the researchers participated in problem solving, they did not take over the issues, but facilitated with and on the students' behalf within the institutional context. Wherever possible, students were encouraged to lead actions. They were also prompted to seek solutions and resources outside the group which, in turn, could be brought back to the group. The research cycle was a collaborative, continuing, and evolving learning process for all involved, resulting in change in actions for many students. Moreover, the project was an empowering process as students began to understand and experience that they were not "just first year students" without power or voice.

In the following sections, we present data generated from focus groups with students and interviews with personnel at each of the three institutions in this study. This report concludes with a discussion of the findings and recommendations for practice, policy, and further research.

1. MAPPING REALITIES AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The Institution

The first institution presented in this study is a commuter community college in the Lower Mainland. In September 1994 semester, enrolment (head count) was 8051 (40% full-time and 58% part-time) students. Forty percent of the students were enroled in university transfer programs, 33% in career and vocational programs, and 27% in general studies. Approximately 60-65% of the total college population was female. As a commuter college, 60% of the students were from the college region, 37% were from outside the region but close enough to drive to classes, and 3% were from the rest of the province, other provinces, and other countries.

The college Mission Statement reflects its community orientation:

> We commit to enhancing the skills, knowledge and values of life-long learners in meeting their goals. . . .We respond to diverse community needs in a rapidly changing society.

The college articulates a philosophy which recognizes that education is important for improving social and economic status, fostering independence, and "increasing potential for achievement in life." It recognizes the importance of life-long education, accessibility to education, and comprehensiveness of opportunities. Coordination with other institutions and responsiveness to changing needs are also important since "education should be part of a democratic community --students, faculty and staff -- should be involved in the college governance system."

The college is divided into two divisions. The academic division allows students to complete the first two years of university studies before transferring to a degree-granting institution. Students can also earn a diploma or associate degree or a 30 credit academic studies certificate. Additionally, the college has an Applied Programs Division. Students can earn either a diploma or certificate and in some cases transfer to a university to complete a degree.

Services and Strategies for Student Success

Since learners' success is important to the institution, various departments provide a multitude of programs and services to enhance students' experiences. To highlight these services, the following information is taken partly from interviews with key college personnel and partly from the college calendar. Programs to enhance student success were defined by a member of the college faculty as "hit and miss and local," and distinctions were made between programs that had integrated services and those that did not. For instance, some orientation packages are built into the various individual programs, such as the child, youth, and family related programs. Students described this orientation as four days of seminars and workshops designed to expose them to the services and facilities available at the college. Another example is the part-time Therapeutic Recreation Program in which all students are assigned a faculty advisor who "generally is accessed by students who have questions around registration or sequence of courses."

Not all "closed" programs, those with limited enrollment and core courses in which students enroll as a cohort, include this type of orientation. The general admissions (university transfer) programs also do not have orientations. In fact, formal student success programs were described as "limited" in the academic area. However, the college offers free "Information Sessions" for prospective and new students in both career and university transfer programs. These sessions last approximately one or two hours, and information is provided about the field or area of study, possible employment prospects, and details about special enrollment requirements (*e.g.*, volunteer hours, criminal record search, *etc.*).

At the beginning of each semester other programs available to all students include a college-wide orientation organized by the Registrar's Office. Workshops are offered by counselors throughout the semester on such things as stress and time management, survival tips for college success, test taking anxiety, overcoming procrastination, assertiveness, and interpersonal relations. Some programs, designed specifically for women, are offered through the Women's Centre. These seminars include math anxiety, communication skills, and balancing school and family. The Women's Centre focuses on "personal development" for women which "may involve changing educational or employment plans or learning specific skills." Additionally, it provides information about community and educational services, daycare, subsidies, and personal support services.

Human Development courses offered through the Career Resource Centre provide students with information about possible careers, the labour market, relationships, and communications. In addition, Reading Skills and Study Skills courses are available. By definition, Developmental Studies courses and programs -- such as Adult Basic Education, remedial courses, and skills based preparatory courses -- are designed for student success.

Five full-time counselors are available for consultation on a drop-in or by appointment basis. All counselors are capable of providing both personal and academic counseling, and they interview every student placed on academic probation if her or his grade point average is 1.50 or less. In addition to the sample of services and programs mentioned above, the college assembled a task force to examine student success issues. A number of projects were proposed and piloted including a clinical nursing skills lab, adjustment courses for English as a Second Language students and a learning tutorial centre. The college continues to evaluate the utility and viability of these and other projects, demonstrating an ongoing concern with student success.

The College has a Dean of Student Services who is "charged with the welfare of students" and is seen as a "powerful" person within the institution. Also, the Registrar is viewed "as much as a caretaker of students as . . . of records" and is the administrator of the appeals process. Other services believed to contribute to student success include Financial Aid, recent developments in "laddering," and Prior Learning Assessment.

The Sample[5]

Students who participated in this study were recruited from the Department of Child, Family and Community Studies. Four of the group members were involved in the Therapeutic Recreation Program, a part-time four year diploma program designed to "train students in the area of leisure for people of all ages with special needs." In addition to general admission criteria, program admission requirements included a medical assessment, criminal history search, writing skill assessment, personal suitability interview, completion of 45 hours of volunteer work in the field, and participation in a program orientation.

The other four students in the focus group were in the child, youth, and counseling services two-year diploma programs. They are also required to submit a medical assessment, a criminal history search, and participate in a personal suitability interview. They must be at least 19 years of age. Those interested in the youth and counseling programs are required to complete 100 hours of supervised volunteer or paid work in the field, and potential childhood education program students are required to submit letters of reference and demonstrate a threshold level reading ability. Before finishing their program, all students in these areas must complete a communications or English requirement with at least a C- grade. Before enrolling in the language course, students must take a writing assessment. Also, these program areas are part of the integrated curriculum that increases mobility and transferability of students between programs and to other institutions.

Research Project Participants

After the researcher visited five classes to outline the project, eight women[6] students ranging in ages from 23 to 49 volunteered to participate in weekly or bi-weekly focus group meetings. Four were enrolled in the part-time evening recreation program. The other four participants were recruited from the child, youth and counseling programs (full-time daytime). Although these two groups met separately, the research findings were combined except where differences emerged. Students were asked to keep journals for recording their post-secondary experiences. As explained to the students, the purpose of the research project was to involve them as active interpreters of their first term college experience. Discussions of issues or problems students encountered (either academic, social, or personal) and helpful and positive aspects of their college experience were facilitated by the researcher in the focus groups. Students were encouraged to articulate any issues or concerns and to problem solve within the group. The role of the researcher, then, was to assist students in exploring problem solving strategies and encourage and promote student action based on those strategies.

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[5] Because students undergo an extensive screening process, admissions criteria are included in this section.

[6] Classes visited during the recruitment process of this study were dominated by women.

Students gave various reason for wanting to participate in the project:

> You came to class three times so when they said we could use this for one of our assignments, I thought "Okay why not?"
>
> I was curious.
>
> I thought it might be fun.
>
> I had been involved in a twin study a long time ago and thought this would be interesting.
>
> It sounds interesting.

Over the course of the project, the students and the researcher met in focus groups four times for approximately one hour each time. Contact between meetings was maintained by telephone, informal interaction and meetings between students on campus.

Results of the Community College Focus Groups

The salient themes emerging from the focus groups can be categorized into three areas. The first is the impact of college on students' family and work lives. This area includes an examination of the relative importance of being a college student, the tensions that emerge when demands as mother, wife, or worker conflict with the demands of student life, students' articulation of these issues, and their strategies to resolve them. The second area is at the program level. Students' concerns centre on academic expectations, demands, interactions with faculty and staff, and program flexibility, and structure. The final thematic area is framed within the institution itself. Students articulate issues in terms of interactions with college administration and structural barriers or enhancements to their success. Although these three divisions are useful for the organization of data, they are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Activities in one area do not occur in isolation from another.

I. The College Experience

Choice of College

All but one of the participants lived within the college region. Two women chose this particular college because it offered a program in their area of interest. One woman had applied to several institutions and enrolled in the one that accepted her, two other women found their way to this institution after being turned down for other programs. After expressing interest in the area, one woman simply acted on the recommendation of a counselor, another enrolled after visiting a college resource centre, and one knew about the institution and program through her work.

Reasons for Going to College

Participants at this location had chosen a closed college program for a number of career-related reasons. For one woman, the choice to attend college evolved out of volunteer work in the same field. For two others, obtaining a credential in the field was a strong motivator. Two women were retraining, one through Vocational Rehabilitation Services because of personal injury and the other privately due to layoffs resulting from a department store closure. Two other women had decided to make career changes, one from banking and the other from previous work as a dental assistant. Another woman had applied to a program in neurology at a different institution, but, after having been turned down twice, she enrolled in the child, youth and counseling related program at this college. When she enrolled, she had already been working in the field.

Despite choosing career oriented programs which were expected to lead to paid employment, the women did not anticipate high earnings to be the greatest benefit of going to college. One student who had an "excellent job" that "paid well" but was "boring" insisted that money was not "the be all and end all."

> I've worked for only money and if you hate the job there isn't any amount of money that has you getting up with a smile on your face.

For some women, having the opportunity to "challenge" or "better" themselves was very important:

> Suddenly your own intellect is at work . . . and then you're in a position where the money isn't the issue . . . then you think in terms of how far can I stretch my brain.

Several years after ending a career as a dental assistant, one woman had this to say about enroling in her college program:

> Coming back to school -- I just love it so much. I can't go back to who I was any more. I met so many people. I'm excited. I have new ideas, my husband sees my energy level; it's like this is great.

One woman with teenage children noted that "you go brain-dead just raising a family," and it was important not to just "sit at home." A 44 year old student saw returning to the college as a way to avoid "future shock":

> I do not want to be just stunned at what's happening in the world when I'm getting older because I've lost touch with how things really are instead of how they used to be. Staying involved and being involved with younger people you're not so surprised and you're not so narrow in your vision. Some [young people] are so enthusiastic and so positive it makes me feel rather hopeful about the future. So I think school is definitely a way to stay connected.

Although a variety of reasons were given for going to college, many of the women cited personal satisfaction and intellectual stimulation as very important to them.

The Need to Succeed

Given the personal importance of college to these women, it is not surprising that they thought it was essential to "do well". The pressure to succeed they placed on themselves is indicated in the following statements made at the beginning of their term:

> You want to do everything properly; you want to do the best.
>
> You really don't want to do the wrong thing. That's the biggy. You just don't.

However, the teaching and learning experience proved to be different than they expected. Students were very concerned about paying attention to the details of their assignments, especially referencing, as they were concerned with losing marks. To help them deal with this issue, the researcher talked about correct referencing, offered to read reference pages on papers (as well as proof read the paper), and encouraged students to ask the instructor for help. Following focus group discussions, the topic of referencing was raised in class, and by the following session the instructor had addressed these concerns.

Another indication of students' concern to succeed was their desire to receive "feedback" from instructors. Women with the least prior post-secondary experience expected that more classroom time would be spent responding to students' questions, clarifying material, and confirming correct answers. That this was not the case was clearly frustrating.

> I don't know if it's right or wrong. . . .There's no real feedback in class to know that you're grasping it in the right way.
>
> I personally don't feel like I'm learning in class. I just feel like I'm sitting there with my eyes crossed. . . . You don't know [if] what sense you're making of the material is right or wrong because we haven't discussed any right or wrong.

Other students often recognized that they were being taught that "there are no really concrete answers." They felt the type of learning at the college level was not only distinct from high school but different from "fun" courses such as "hairdressing" and short evening or weekend courses on creative writing.

> It's a foreign concept for school. In high school it was just the teacher blurt[ed] out the information and you just bat it back. Here it's "Oh, what about this?" And you think "ya, what about this?" So you read and talk and think about it. Sometimes it's a bit of a stretch to get your head around some of the things they're asking.

This level of education and style of teaching and learning proved to be a challenge to group participants.

Family and College: Balancing Demands

Although not all of the women in the focus group had dependent children living at home, all were either married or living with a partner. Much of the focus group discussion centred on the difficulty of balancing domestic obligations (cooking and cleaning) and participating in family related activities (time with partners and children), with the demands of college level academic work. Almost from the beginning of the semester, students began to feel the strain of these two sets of obligations. For example, when asked by another group member if it was a hardship to come to college, one student answered "No, except taking care of the house and cooking." Also, others noted,

> If I take time to go for lunch with my husband . . . I feel guilty that I'm not working on [school work]. And when I'm at home working on this, I feel guilty that my son's talking to me and I'm not responding to him at all.
>
> I do 11 hour shifts . . . but I have to juggle because I have house work.

Within the focus groups, the researcher encouraged the women to access resources at the college's Women's Centre which included free workshops on such topics as balancing different roles assumed at home, work, and school. However, students were reluctant to do so. The primary reason given was a lack of time. Through ongoing focus group discussions, students revealed other considerations for not participating. The women in the group tended to turn to informal networks of friends both within and outside of the focus group and to spouses or other family members for help and support. In reference to the members of the focus group, one student stated:

> We've kind of got a good network going here and then by doing that and talking to one another, it alleviates a lot of stress and makes you realize that everybody is feeling the same way.

Despite students' reluctance to seek support within established college support systems, (such as independent workshops and counselors), programs that were a part of specific courses tended to be very useful. In addition, the intimacy of the closed program allowed students to build informal support networks where they tended to be more comfortable.

> I feel more comfortable with people I know to talk about things. They know what kind of work load I have because they're in the same program, and it's . . . common bonds I can relate better with.
>
> I found a group actually in [one of my courses]. We met because we have a project, and everybody is married . . . so it was just really good to have a group of women who all have the same problems, and they just gave ideas with how they coped with it and that really helped. It just helped kind of letting it out.

Another woman found working in a group rewarding because she developed new friendships.

> [If] you have a great group, then it's wonderful. You know there's a real sense of camaraderie and it's a lot of fun. People bring a lot of energy to it and it works so well. We're doing a little project and it's four of us involved, and it's great. I think it's the biggest connection I've made in school; probably, we'll stay friends.

Other coping strategies that emerged closer to the end of the semester included relinquishing some responsibilities of non-student roles. When one married student explained how she learned to give greater responsibility for domestic chores to her partner, a mother of two school-aged children was prompted to do the same with her children.

> I've given up a lot of control. Whatever way you make lunches, whatever you put in them, however you make dinner, or whatever you buy grocery shopping -- if I'm not doing it, what you do is great.

> I'll actually let my husband go out and do the grocery shopping himself.

Reintegrating recreational and other activities was part of regaining control over their lives.

> I finally went back to [the gym] today and it just made a world of difference. It's like you lose focus, and then it's a domino effect where you don't have time to go to the gym but you make time, and then you've got more time to do your work, and you go about it in a better approach.

Although this served as a partial solution, it was also necessary for students to adjust the amount of time and effort spent on school work compared with other activities. Balancing time and effort evolved over the course of the semester as students learned to work more efficiently and to be less concerned with getting everything exactly right.

> I'm finding I slack off a little sometimes. I'll say, "Well, this is all I can do," and that's where I stop.

> I learned you don't spend 40 hours on something that you could do in 14.

> I'm not going to give 200% when I've only got 50% to give. I can only give what I can give and if that's not enough well . . .

For another student, it meant that college could not be her first priority:

> For me school is secondary. It has to be in my life with my kids and everything.

Programs such as those offered through the Women's Centre, were designed to help women cope with these conflicting interests; however, students neither sought help from the college, nor accessed programs once they realized they existed. Informal networks of friends were preferred. When students were forced by unrelenting pressure to participate, arrangements for family responsibilities were worked out with partners or other family members, students' own behaviour patterns were altered, and the priority accorded academic tasks was reduced. Participation in college-run success-related programs seemed dependent on whether they were mandatory.

Student Orientation

As previously mentioned, participants in the focus group attended either a full-time (child, youth and counseling) or part-time (therapeutic recreation) program. Students in the full-time programs were "put through" a four day orientation before beginning regular classes. This orientation included an introduction to the physical layout of the college and to the specific college services. Student response to the orientation was mixed, and most criticism focused on its length:

> I'd looked forward so long to coming back to school, and then it was almost anti-climactic to come back to four days of seminars just to tell us what it was all about. I just wanted to begin. I just wanted to go to class.
>
> They were telling us everything they had . . . and it's like four days of telling us how much work we had ahead of us, how to manage our stress and all the services available to us . . . and its like well we're having trouble with the stress this is creating telling us how much stress we're in for.

Participants generally agreed that the orientation "could have been shorter," but despite students' wanting to "get on with it," some found it very useful.

> I really liked it. I don't know what's going on. I certainly didn't want to be plunked down to work because I had no idea how this school worked, where my next class was, what was available.

The sections of the orientation thought to be most useful were the library tour and the time management workshop. The library included a work sheet to be completed and marked:

> They gave you four or five different sets of questions, and you passed them around so everybody got working on a bunch, like maybe four of us got the same questions. You go to the computer and type it, and you'd have to find the book, and then find a reference and find a journal.

The time management workshop, which would be "used in some form or fashion" throughout the semester, was also deemed to be helpful. Indeed, students referred to and compared methods of organizing their time quite frequently during focus group discussions.

According to part-time students, the part-time program did not have an extensive orientation process, but a library tour was arranged to take place during a Saturday. One student missed the tour, but when she needed to access the library she found that help was readily available. In addition, each student in the part-time program was assigned a "faculty advisor" whom students could contact for help. However, students were reluctant to approach their advisors because they "had their boundaries of how they [could] intervene with us and then we are sent to a student counselor." Nonetheless, one student who was struggling with a course telephoned her faculty advisor. In the end though, she did not feel that she received the help she needed.

> I phoned [my advisor] and I'm saying, "Hey, I may not pass this," and she said, "Well, we'll let you know if there's a problem." So I guess they let you know at the midterm. But she did not say, "Oh, well maybe you should, or maybe this or maybe that." So, thanks!

Both program areas involved the students in "forums" designed to bring together first term students with students who had been in the program at least one year. According to one student, the purpose of the forum was

> [The forum is] for all the classes, to air out our feelings about the structure and . . . to talk to us about how to manage [our next class] and . . . to have some second and third and fourth year students there for us to talk to, and it's just sort of a real bitch session.

> [It gave] us a chance to hear [other students'] feelings so you feel like you're not . . . that alone, but I think a big percentage of the class was coming back to school for the first time in a long time, and everybody was sharing those same anxieties.

Although students enjoyed the interaction with those who were further along in the program, they did not have the confidence to raise many issues of concern.

II. The Academic Experience

Much of focus group discussion around the academic experience centred on students' expectations about the program, students' interactions with instructors, group work, completion of assignments, program structure, quality of teaching, and the classroom experience. In the first part of this section, the focus is on part-time students' experiences since they were considerably different from those of the full-time students.

Student Expectations About the Part-time Program

Initially, part-time students were confused about the nature of the credential to be earned following successful completion of their studies at the community college. This was linked with some, although not a great deal, of concern about attending college and not university and the possibility that their credential would be considered less "good" because it was from a college rather than a university.

> I thought there was a degree. Well, I liked the idea of it you know. I kept saying, "We'll get a degree," and ah, I think I'm still going to call mine a degree.

For the part-time students, there was also considerable discrepancy between what they thought the program would be about and what they were actually learning. Even the one woman who had some experience in the field had different expectations about the course content.

> Well, I'm in the field and when I signed up for the course I thought I would learn more things to do with activities . . . but I was surprised.
>
> When I came into the course, I thought this is what I need to work with elderly people. Well, what I'm learning has nothing to do with what I planned to do.

These students expected the program to be more "fun" and less "academic."

> I thought, "Let's play [games], let's modify them and get everybody involved. Let's teach these clients how to play." I didn't realize it would be this academic.
>
> I didn't realize that the actual program is . . . an awful lot of learning. It's not what we thought in the sense of being just play. They put a lot more education into the course than I thought.
>
> Very technical, very academically demanding.

Participants used the focus groups as a forum to develop an understanding of why the curriculum was so "academic." They drew links between what they were learning and its practical application. By the end of the project, and after completing the class, students were able to comprehend university transfer credit and understand the necessity of a wide variety of knowledge in different settings. For some, knowing that "my knowledge has increased" was a way of reconciling the difference between actual course content and initial expectations. However, for this group, expectations about course content were linked with expectations about the nature of part-time study -- especially the amount of time it required.

> I thought it would be a couple of nights, a little homework on Sundays, that sort of thing.
>
> It's taking me away from my friends and my family completely. I'm not having time for anything else.

Clearly, the this group of part-time students found they had much less time for non-college work or activities than they had expected.

Pace of the Courses

For the part-time group, the stress of academic demands was particularly great. This was partly due to the pace of the program. Within seven weeks, students were required to complete a "triad" (group project), midterm, research paper, and final exam plus in class assignments and exercises.

> We have a [45 minute] project that we have to do in groups of threes which we start December 2nd, that's the first night to do it. [We] have a midterm which is this Monday and then we have our research papers due December 6th. December 16th is our final. So it's just like, Wow!
>
> But it's just exhausting. I feel bagged. I feel dead.

Relationships with Instructors

Students linked the rapid pace of the course with a problematic relationship with one instructor.

> And the instructor . . . she's a very good instructor, but the problem is that we're finding that because of the speed of the course the knowledge that we want like, important questions we're not able to get [answered] because the questions that we need answers [to], she doesn't have time.

When asked by the researcher if they could approach the instructor during office hours or some other time outside of class, students again insisted there was not enough time. Getting to campus during the day for this group was often difficult, and other arrangements made by instructors were not considered satisfactory. One instructor arranged to meet with students over dinner in the cafeteria:

> The instructor did inform us is if we had any specific question she would be in the cafeteria eating her dinner . . . and we could approach her then, but not everybody is going to be able to make it during that time.
>
> Well, she can't answer everybody's questions all at once either.

When this issue was explored further, however, time became only one of a number of reasons students were dissatisfied. In addition, students did not feel comfortable approaching instructors outside of the classroom, despite instructors' efforts to be available.

> But . . . to go up and say to a teacher, "Listen I don't understand this," like you had to make it at that time right, and there was no flexibility there.

The evening students assumed that instructors would not want to take time after class to meet with them and that any interruptions during class would only make matters worse.

> The instructors are available a lot more during the day. In the night time they're gone. You know at ten o'clock, they're gone. They're not gone back down to their office . . . "Okay, I get a spare between bla bla I'll be down there if you guys need to go over this stuff." It's "See you later alligator. I'm out of here."
>
> It's like one hour that you get with the instructor and if you ask questions that only goes to prove that he's going to have to accelerate through other information.

Approaching instructors was also difficult for some of the full-time day students, but they were less reluctant to do so. Some part-time and full-time students, were concerned that their grades could suffer if they said something negative to the instructor. However, when this issue was raised in the focus group, students talked through the likelihood of such an occurrence and the recourse for students if instructors reacted negatively.

> Our teacher isn't the type of person that would take it lightly and that might go against you, and so I'm wondering whether I should write a typed letter and stick it under the door or whether I should go and talk to her. I'd rather talk to her, but I don't want to put my next three semesters in jeopardy because of it.

Another student commented:

> Do you think that would really happen though? . . . don't confront her really as doing a lousy job, just say you think you're a really good teacher, but I'm finding I'm not as attentive because we're taking too long. And if your A goes to a C, which I don't think will happen because the teachers have an ethic, you can challenge.

There was also a general sense that teachers were placed on a "pedestal" by students and thereby made unapproachable.

> They really are approachable, but we really make them unapproachable, I think.
>
> You perceive them as an authority figure, right.

Although students appeared to want help from instructors, students pointed out that there was not enough time, they were reluctant to approach instructors, or instructors seemed inaccessible due to time constraints.

Group Work

Both part-time and full-time students were required to complete assignments involving work with three or four other students. Although this "group work" served as a source of networking and support, it was also a source of great stress, especially if some of the group members were not "motivated or ambitious." Arranging times to meet was difficult, especially for those of the group who were working or had other obligations.

> If I have a good group of people and we're on the same wave length [but] if you get somebody from every different aspect and you just can't develop an idea because I'm off on this creative tangent and they're off on this factual tangent and then they're busy and you can't get together, what are we going to do?
>
> But you know, people know who the doers are and the next time a group situation comes around they're going to be with people who are worse.
>
> You'll find that people do migrate toward each other, and you become a little more selective.

Part of the difficulty facing the students and group work was that a mark was tied to other members' participation. Other students simply did not like group work:

> I think we should all individually write up our project instead of one write up for all of us because this way the teacher can tell who is doing the work and who isn't.
>
> I'm not used to it. I mean I did it back in public school, and I'm used to working by myself.

Students used the focus group as a forum to air their grievances about group work, to discuss the importance of learning to "work with others," to "take control if nobody else does or they lost motivation or ambition," and to discuss strategies for dealing with those who "hang on your coat-tails."

III. The Campus Experience

In relation to the campus experience, students discussed the following topics as problematic: college administration and staff, parking, and registration.

College Administration and Staff

Students' interactions with administration centred around accessing information, parking, and registering for courses. When dealing with staff students found them helpful, but the bureaucratic process seemed unnecessarily cumbersome. Getting accurate and timely information was the focus of much discussion.

When trying to get a parking pass, for example, one student stated:

> I inquired about parking way before I knew someone who went here and she inquired for me, and she got the run-around. She was told to go to the parking attendant and get some kind of form, but before you do that you have to go up to some room at 400 get a form from them you fill that out go to the parking attendant to approve it and bring it back. So they gave her the wrong information and they told her that I had to come when I registered and apply for parking and that wasn't true. Like you could have got it before, and those people who applied even up to registration could still get parking but once we came for our first day it was like no parking.

Parking

The bureaucratic process was often compounded by difficulties in accessing such services as parking. Due to limited availability, it was extremely problematic and frustrating for students.

> Well, this is really stupid, but the [most stressful] thing really is parking.
>
> If you come here at any time, like say on a whim . . . you usually can't get into the parking lot, and there's no street parking; well, it's really inconvenient.

All of the students who drove to the institution commented on parking difficulties. Those who commuted by bus showed their concern as they were equally familiar with the problem.

Registration

Initially registration was a cumbersome process that involved a great deal of patience.

> I found the whole registration . . . here was problematic. It was for me anyway. I found that a lot of things are not clear and that they're not terribly accommodating. They don't care how many times or how long you stand in line.

With the introduction of the telephone registration system, students expressed concerns about "getting through" at scheduled registry times that were either too early or too late and not getting into the courses they wanted.

> That telephone registration [you] get put on hold, and you get cut off, and you've got to phone back. [Before] sure it was crowded, it was hot, but you got the courses you wanted.

For one student, however, once she had used the teleregistration system, she found "registration was a breeze."

> Yeah, the phone registration was a piece of cake.

Students in the focus group discussed the details of registering, how they were arranging schedules, and different information sources. The experience of buying books demonstrates the difficulty students faced getting accurate information.

> I came here the week previous to many things starting and went in the book store, had all my books piled up, my couple of hundred dollars, and [the clerk] said, "Do you have a definite book list from your profs?" I said, "No," and she said, "Well my recommendation is that you do not buy them." So I said "Really, well there's a return policy." "No," she said, "I really would recommend that you don't buy them." So I put them back, and then I came back and there's line-ups like right around the concourse, and they're lined up as many hours as the book store is open.

Over the course of the semester, students learned that "everybody had a different take on things" and that "you've got to go to the highest level to get the real information." Students used the focus group to "compare notes," share information, and sort out who the best person to talk with was, but near the end of the term students still felt it was something they had to learn through experience.

> But it's almost like you have to go through it before you learn about it. You don't know any of the . . . tricks you have to know to get things.

Students also used the focus groups as an information gathering forum around common issues, such as required courses, upcoming assignments, or likeability of particular instructors.

Conclusion

As the semester progressed, students become more proficient at getting the information, answers, and support they needed. It was clear, however, that the role the institution played in the process was varied; sometimes indirect, as was the case when students developed informal support groups within a particular class; sometimes minimal, as with the restrained discussion generated in the forums, and sometimes absent, as when students problem-solved on their own or with family support.

It also became clear that students were reluctant to seek free, topical information, workshops, or other support through advising and counselling centres. They preferred to problem solve on their own or with family and friends.

Students tended to have inaccurate, incomplete, and often simply wrong information about many aspects of college life that extensive screening and orientation processes were unable to eliminate. The focus group approach employed in the project was instrumental in identifying students' expectations and needs in relation to the needs and demands of the institution. It served to articulate difficulties as defined by the participants and facilitate solutions in harmony with them.

2. PERSONNEL INTERVIEWS AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Background

The second part of this research project involved interviews with key institutional personnel. Administrators, instructors, counsellors and other key personnel at the institution were selected for interviews based on their involvement with first year students.

Sample

A total of six institutional personnel, four men and two women, participated in hour long taped interviews. Four administrators and two faculty members (one counsellor who also taught and one instructor) were interviewed. Due to time constraints in one person's schedule, two administrators were interviewed together. Each participant was asked to discuss the concepts of student success and retention, to describe the programs at the institution designed to enhance student success and to elaborate on any evaluation of those programs or research related to student success. Also, they were asked to discuss the impact of current trends (such as rising tuition, burgeoning enrollments, the development of new institutions) on student success.

Results

Analyses of the five transcripts resulted in the emergence of six general themes. The highlights are reported in the following sections.

I. Defining Student Success

As illustrated by responses to the request to discuss the meaning of student success, clearly it is something that encompasses many ideas and is a complex concept to define. Interviewees discussed what the term meant to them or their program. A number of ways to articulate student success emerged. One recurrent definition centred on the student.

> In the notion student success there is the . . . basic issue of whose perspective. If you're taking a strict traditional historic adult ed. perspective that can only be answered with the eyes of the student.

> I see success related to personal success as well as academic success and I think it has a personal definition for that particular student, and that's why it is so very difficult to evaluate or to measure, . . . [it's] what students would define as their success.

Student success was defined in terms of the institutional goals, needs and commitments of the student. Often students have clear goals in mind when they enroll in college courses and programs and are successful to the degree that they achieve those goals. During one interview an administrator argued that if students could attain their objectives as they defined them, they would be successful.

> If a student got all the courses that they wanted to complete their program however they defined the programme, from a student's point of view the grades must have been adequate. Students must have achieved their educational goal whatever it was.

Another administrator noted, however, that the institution must play a role in success by recognizing the diversity of students' needs and goals.

> There isn't one size that fits all. But rather what can we do to meet the needs of individual students, rather just than just looking at ourselves as, "Here's a menu of what we offer, pick something or not." Being more flexible is what I'm saying.

Interviewees indicated that differences in student ability must also be considered. Thus, student success defined by both administration and faculty, was not necessarily synonymous with high grades.

> We tend to try to think in terms of student success meaning students are developing their potential and they are achieving excellence for them which won't . . . always mean a grade.

> A lot of the students that I deal with here have great struggles in just getting to class everyday and being able to hand in assignments, not so much even concerned about the quality of the assignments, but just being able to do them. So I see that as their success if that's how they define it. . . . Success is a real range from something as very simple as being able to get to classes on time because many students are struggling with a lot of personal issues, to be able to go on to wherever you want to go.

If students decided that a course or program was not "right" for them, making the decision to withdraw from it was also seen as a type of success. One administrator commented that if "we've helped them to understand themselves and their environment better, there's nothing wrong with that." Another noted, "There's a lot that goes on within an institution like this where people are figuring out what they want to do, and so part of student success actually involves withdrawal." Accordingly,

> One can hypothesize that if a student gets what they need or discovers something that they don't want, and makes a decision, to drop out to leave, to not complete or change status, again from a student based perspective, it seems to me you can argue plausibly that person's made the right decision.
>
> And then there's the other kind of success where there would be students who start programs and this is related somewhat to retention, but will decide that that program is not one that they either want to be in or should be in. So I see a student making a decision to leave a program as actually being a success decision, but of course it doesn't look like that when you look at retention issues.

Thus, both faculty and administration agreed when defining student success, that "some forms of attrition are actually quite good" and that assisting students to make withdrawal decisions was an important function of the institution. However, a high degree of compatibility between the needs and goals of the individual student and the ability of the institution to provide them was important. The following example was presented as a positive decision by a student who realized that a program was not appropriate for her.

> One [student] . . . was attending class the first day when I talked about the assignments being around group work and [the expectation that they would] do triads and groups and expect to put time in outside of the class, outside your home. And she quit that next day.

Thus, "dropping-out" decisions, reached with the help of counsellors and instructors, can be seen as positive. It was not necessarily a failure if a student realized she or he was not in a program that suited.

Academic competence was also an important indicator of students' overall success. It was examined from the point of view of the students who either completed courses or a program that enabled them to continue with their education or move into the job market.

> One dimension would be "Are they successful academically?" I think the way that some people look at success is have they completed the program, with the kind of grades that will allow them to go out and get a job or allow them to move on to university or whether . . . it allows them to write their [professional exams]. So that's one definition of success that's easy to measure and easy to see.

Employment and transfer to another institution was seen as an important part of success at the community college level.

> There's a tendency to view success in technocratic terms *i.e.*, completion of courses, completion of programs, and the next step attainment of whatever it was those courses and programs are formally structured to deliver at the end *i.e.*, employment, successful transfer, whatever. Or successful attainment of standards that enable people to do something else. The notion of us [the college] as being a step on a long journey.

Although participants discussed student success in terms of students' needs and goals and the ability of the institution to help provide them, the realities of retention issues in terms of costs and demand for spaces was not overlooked. Retention was defined as much more straight forward. These definitions avoided the complexity and ambiguity of student success. It could be "defined as reducing or eliminating dropout. . . .You avoid those issues by simply defining, as well did they stay in the course or program they purport to have wanted to begin with." Interviewees noted that it was relatively easy to measure success as the number of credentials awarded.

> A credential [is the] only one that we can really handle because that's the only one we know of -- we don't know what students really want. If you just wanted the one year transfer at [the college] and then move on to a university college or [a university], we don't know that.

Personnel recognized, however, that retention measures, as traditionally defined, were problematic because of the prevalence and relative ease of transfer within the post-secondary system.

> So that's why retention again becomes an issue that on one hand is quite easy to measure but on the other hand isn't . . . We often have students here, who switch programs so while it looks like they have left a program or have left the college, they actually haven't. They've just left a program within the college. They have gone somewhere else. . . . Maybe they have transferred to a different institution, but often it's within the college.

Finally, the notion of productivity and "value for dollars" was discussed. When considering the necessity of "keeping costs down [and] keeping classrooms full," dropping-out, regardless of the reasons, was seen as a failure because of reduced production.

> The notion of productivity . . . that is mechanical productivity as an organization, if every seat is full we are productive, ergo, the political heat's off us. . . . If somebody has dropped out even if that's a good decision for them and we can applaud it and all those other good things, the fact is they may well have plugged a seat that somebody else might have . . . been able to take advantage of. Therefore in the economics of service provision and resource allocation, it is technically still a failure to some degree.

Both faculty and administration saw student success and retention as two distinct but related notions. Student success, the more complex of the two, was articulated in terms of student choices, needs and goals and the ability of the institution to facilitate their realization in concert with the student. Accordingly, withdrawal from a program was defined as part of student success as those goals and needs changed throughout students' college enrollment, as was academic success and program completion. Student retention, much more narrowly defined as keeping students enrolled in their chosen program until completion, was also very much a concern as fiscal restraint and increased demand for seats added to pressures for accountability to "those who pay for things, our government people who feel responsible for tax money." Thus, emergent from these interviews was the tension between *student centred success* and *accountability centred retention*.

II. Student Success Programs and Services

It is a part of the philosophy of the college to provide services to all those in the community who would like to participate in college programs and courses. Thus, this community college serves students with vastly different abilities and needs. Accordingly, the college maintains an extensive array of student success programs and services, and has "various kinds of courses or organized learning that are calculated to assist students to do that which they wanted to do." Some of these programs have had a long history in the college.

> Almost everything apart from things like the Learning Centre have been around for quite some time. They've increased, they've experimented. . . . [some] have been in existence for . . . as long as the college has been.

A good example of a long standing service within the college was the Women's Centre.

> The whole issue of . . . the plight of the female student . . . , especially the middle aged female student and . . . the middle aged single parent female student, led us years ago to set up a Women's Centre, which we have clung to through thick and thin. In fact I think we're now the sole surviving Women's Centre in British Columbia.

Participants mentioned courses which had long been a part of the college structure. These were in keeping with the college philosophy of open admission rather than admissions based on academic ability. Many of the programs were designed to enhance student knowledge and ability. In some situations,

> Students who have come in to the college are ill-prepared to succeed in various courses or programs they may want to go into because they haven't learnt well enough some of the concepts or skills that they have already been exposed to.

To make up for this,

> We run a series of preparatory courses designed to essentially be compensatory in nature. Students are coming in . . . who may have not picked up very much from high school and they need to be able to improve their comprehension of textbooks, be able to succeed at exams a little better than they have in the past. Now, in many cases that's supplementary rather than compensatory . . . It's not remedial in nature.

Other programs emerged over several years as the institution grew and developed; currently, the range of programs and services is extensive. As with most institutions, a Student Services Centre is available to help students with their academic plans and ensure they have adequate information to make decisions.

> Student services is all success geared in making sure that the students have the right kinds of information. The academic advisors here, you notice, provide information on programs. We are here to help with career planning as well as personal problems.

> We may mediate on occasion with instructors and students, when they are having difficulty.

The institution had a large counselling centre which provided personal counselling both by appointment and on a drop-in basis. Counsellors also met with those students who were identified as struggling academically.

> We have a policy here where students are placed on probation when after 12 credits their academic level . . . is at 1.5 or below. They have to come and see a counsellor. We sit down, we say, "Okay, what's going on here . . . what can we do to help you or how can we help you?"

The counselling centre also provides workshops on a number of topics throughout the academic year, including pre-workshops advertised throughout the college. The workshops are organized on a drop-in basis and are related to a number of student success topics or issues.

> The counsellors put them on free and students simply arrive. We do try and do some pre-registration, but it is simply easier we found to just do it on a drop in basis. We advertise when they're taking place just come, bring your lunch or just come if you feel like it and they would be on things like . . . test taking strategies, how to deal with homework issues.

A series designed for women students was also made available through the Women's Centre. They included such subjects as juggling home, work and school, confidence building, math anxiety, stress management, assertiveness skills, and time management for women. In addition,

> When we have a practicum student attached to the counselling discipline the counselling student will often do a support group. Most of the support groups have been related to some issues around self esteem. . . . In addition to the workshops we do for the general student population at the Women's Centre, we will go into classrooms.

Additional services for all students include the financial aid office, international students' services, library services, and disabled students' services. Others offered by the institution include free workshops, counselling and advising services, and the academic orientation at the beginning of the year. These are organized by the registrar's office and are available to all students. Other services, however, were specific to particular programs. Generally "closed" programs, those with limited enrollment and required courses that students would take as a group, tended to provide "a lot more time up front" in terms of the selection process and orientation compared with "open" programs like general arts and sciences where students could choose their courses. Frequently, they did not take more than one class with the same group of students. Also, unlike the general arts and science programs, closed programs tended to have built-in success services and structures, such as a mandatory orientation in the library. The implications of these differences for the students were discussed.

> [In a closed program of] one or two years, they're working with a small group of students, they know each other, they know the instructors, and there is a lot of support there. It's a minority of students [less than 15% at this institution] who are in those kinds of programs. The vast majority coming taking two, three, four courses, various times of the week, probably not staying on campus because we don't have a lot of study space or social space, and not necessarily knowing your instructor other than superficially, not knowing your classmates other than maybe two or three that they sit beside or they see in their classes.

When asked what had prompted the need for the development and maintenance of the student success programs, one interviewee suggested that the institution had grown to a level of maturity that reduced the potential threat of self-examination, thus allowing for a critical look at the efficiency and effectiveness of many of its programs.

> We've got a large enrolment, we've got a waiting list of students and so now we can worry about retaining and serving our existing students while doing good things for them. We're in the nice situation of having more students than we can serve so it's not threatening to look internally at ourselves and say, "Are we really doing it as well as we could?"

However, it was clear that some programs had recently emerged as the result of increased concern with the costs of attrition which "have brought things to the fore. . . . We realize that every time a student comes in, fills up a seat, and doesn't complete the course, we've prevented somebody else from coming into that seat who may have completed it." As a result,

> [We] became increasingly worried over our internal problems of financial pressures and technical wastage. Programs that were running very light in the second year. Over crowded classes in year one, light classes in year two, log jams with the unions over it, which at times got really really hostile. And desperation on the part of the administration. When you've only got so much money to go around, from the government's perspective, we have to show that we're serving a given number of students.

As a result of these concerns, initiatives were begun to address the "unnerving level of attrition operating" within some programs. Out of this basis the Student Success Project was conceived.

> The people involved in that project have worked with program people to think through ways of addressing . . . [student success] . . . and piece by piece there have been fairly dramatic improvements shown program by program.

A number of pilot programs emerged to address issues of student success and program efficiency in a number of areas. One person interviewed provided a brief summary of the new Learning Centre where students struggling with a particular course could be referred for extra help.

> They have to be referred by faculty. It's just a small room where students can be . . . referred to for some specific skills. It seems to have been successful. I think there has

> been requests for a budget this . . . coming year to keep it going and the hope is that this will grow and expand.

Other pilot projects had the potential to become regular services at the college. These included creation of an open laboratory where nursing students could practice specific nursing skills, production of a video where alumni "share knowledge" about the nursing program, various "adjunct courses" intended to assist students in identified areas, and college preparation courses designed to assist adult students with mental health disabilities.

III. Responsibility

The responsibility for ensuring student success was seen as dispersed throughout the institution. One faculty member commented: "I think it would be shared by all faculty [members]. I would like to see a college-wide ownership of the issue." In addition, one administrator suggested that it was important to create a "success culture" within the institution and insisted that to do this "there has to be the support and fostering by administrators."

> An individual faculty member can do certain things, but it is very limited. It stops right there. So I see the initiators coming from the [entire] faculty and [the] administration.

Responsibility for student success was also tied to a concern with attrition; one administrator saw the recent success initiatives noted above as addressing "problems of attrition, or if you like, assuring student success." For this person, the responsibility for "student success" existed at all levels of the institution, but leadership had to come from "above." Accordingly, the recent initiatives and "some fairly savage chopping . . . coupled with threats that have been followed through in terms of program costs and wastage, have tended to raise the whole issue" as a concern within the entire institution. This administrator saw these measures as essential:

> It will flounder without the entire institution providing an environment within which that is encouraged [and] supported and if necessary punished if . . . there's a lot of damage that's being unaddressed.

Other interviewees articulated what they saw as the specific roles and responsibilities of a program. For example,

> An individual program I think [has the responsibility] to set valid assessment criteria and then to have valid thresholds, so that you don't get students who struggle from the beginning, but you set them up for success not failure … Even though it kind of goes against the college philosophy of accessibility, I think it's really important to have a reasonable selection process. . . . And then to carry out a program . . . to give encouragement along the way. Provide feedback students need to help them make decisions to continue the program, [or] whether there's something elsewhere.

Other faculty members expected students to assume some of the responsibility for their own success. One person noted the following examples:

> We'll have students who come in here on probation because they didn't know they could drop. Even though all over the college it says withdrawal deadlines and gives the date. Or students who didn't know they had to pay their fees on time even though . . . the calendar . . . says you must pay your fees by this date or you're . . . deregistered. So yes, I see a lot of responsibility for students but . . . a lot of students . . . have never really had a lot of responsibility and then . . . others . . . are super responsible.

All those interviewed clearly saw the responsibility for student success residing at all levels within the college, including at the level of the student. All administrators commented on the need for them to take an active and leading role in making student success a priority at the department and faculty level.

IV. Research and Evaluation

Interviewees were asked to comment on their perception of the success of the aforementioned programs. The responses were varied. Some interviewees pointed to specific programs that seemed to have a positive impact on those involved. For example, the Student Learning Centre provided a place for instructors to send students who could not keep up with the demands of the course. This action resulted in students successfully completing the course.

> We've actually recently sent a questionnaire to all of the instructors who referred students over this last year to the Learning Centre to say, "You referred a student to us. . . . How good was that experience? Did you notice if it helped the student? Did you find that we gave you the right kind of information? Did it work out? Was it a successful relationship?" . . . [The instructors] said, "Oh this was fantastic. . . . I would never have been able to help my students," and they did succeed and they have people who clearly otherwise would have failed the course had they not had that intervention.

Also, indications of program success occurred in areas that were singled out for attention. For example, adjunct courses were linked to ESL curriculum with regular arts or sciences courses and were reported to have been positive experiences for the students and instructors. One administrator thought that

> where we have tried to integrate those functions we have been very successful. Where we haven't integrated those functions, there are at least observable signs that we and everybody involved in those areas could probably be doing a better job. So I think there's at least a positive indicator that those kind of services and programs are making a difference, where they're used.

When asked to comment on the evaluation of other programs, the interviewees noted that it primarily involved asking students to fill out an evaluation form following a workshop, course, or program. However, one person interviewed noted that student evaluation forms could not always be relied upon to provide accurate information, for sometimes students were "just telling us information that they felt we wanted to hear." Another person commented "We're very weak at being able to identify what the student's point of view is."

When asked about research in relation to student success, several administrators commented on the "unit review process". Each unit of the college undergoes a review every five years in order to monitor the success of programs offered.

> All of our programs and services are evaluated on an ongoing basis . . . [and must] undergo a fairly stringent evaluation once in every five year cycle. As part of [this] unit review, we would be looking at those kinds of [success] issues, talking to students, monitoring the success or not of those programs and services.

One administrator, however, pointed out that this was a "monitoring' process rather than an evaluation. Likewise, in general, several of those interviewed agreed that there was little research into student success at the college. One administrator noted: "I'm not sure that we have an awful lot of data research that would show that we've actually improved things." Another commented:

> Research probably in the formal sense . . . the answer is probably "no [we have not done that]." Some follow up studies have been done sort of the regular pre and post . . . those kinds of things, but in a formal research design sense probably not.

However, ideas about what data should be collected were discussed by several administrators and one faculty member. Someone suggested that

> In an ideal world I would like to see . . . [data] collected every single semester, "What [is] your current program, what are your current educational goals, how many of your courses do you want to take at [this institution]," [so] that each semester that would be tracked. But we're a long ways from that yet.

In addition, one interviewee argued that all post-secondary institutions have not been "able to look at outcomes research."

> Where we and other areas have been very slow to move, probably simply because we haven't had the resources, is to actually track what is going on per student when they come in to the institution. What do they come with, what do they go with, their aspirations, expectations, their skills? What do they leave with? What is the value-added that [the college] has provided to that student in coming here?

Although there "used to be" information collected on incoming students, little was collected on those leaving. However, this institution had collected some data with course withdrawal surveys. They found that

> When students were . . . withdrawing from courses and they went to the registrars office . . . we gave them a survey [that] said, "Why are you withdrawing from this course?" Most of them were doing things like dropping down one or two courses because they had taken on too much, and they were dropping a course in order to protect their GPA average.

According to one administrator, one area little explored was when students did not withdraw but simply stopped attending the program or course or voluntarily re-enrolled in courses. In addition, little was known about "the ones who go on and off probation or the ones who even though they don't officially go on probation we know they're not succeeding very well." One of the faculty members and all of those at the administrative level commented on the paucity of research across the institution.

V. Further Efforts to Ensure Student Success

When asked to identify what further efforts should be made to ensure student success at this institution, one person noted that the first thing "we have to know [is] what we mean by student success and have some sense of agreement and awareness." Following that,

> I think we have to have some data so we know where the problems are, or maybe not problems, but simply be able to describe ourselves. And we have more work to do there. We have some evidence, but there's an awful lot that we don't know.

Another person identified changing economic forces as an influence on the type of student enrolling in the institution. Moreover, the student population attending college needed to be better identified.

> I think, outside economic conditions are providing a lot higher motivation for students . . . but it also increases the desperation factor. We have a lot of people who are being driven, they've been fired, they've been, laid off. They're not here because they want to be, they're not here because of any particular positive life decisions that they've made. They're forced to be here. That's scary stuff. They're highly motivated but they're frightened and they're angry.

Another interviewee commented on the need for "better data" and to gather qualitative data. Following data collection, coordination of services and programs across the institution was seen as the next step.

> And then we have to do some action and some coordinating and we're pretty good at coordinating among our own areas, doing cross boundary kind of coordination, we're not particularly good at.

Participants identified the mentoring program as an area that could use further development.

> There's a lot of posturing about the sanctity of the faculty/student relationship. Lots and lots of our faculty have never seen a student unless that student presents themselves and with the pressures a lot of our students are dealing with, remember the mean age of our students is around 26, there's an awful lot of people with mid-life problems. I really think that the knowledge of an informed critical but supportive faculty member, . . . can have an enormous beneficial impact on a student, and we don't do that.

Finally, interviewees identified the need to link students with the world of work by creating partnerships between the college and government for student employment after program completion and in terms of co-operative education and community partnerships.

> Educational institutions . . . can do a lot to help students succeed, especially . . . if they actually work in conjunction with business and industry to determine the kinds of things that people need in the work place, to adjust to new circumstances . . . Forging those kinds of partnerships and entering into that kind of cooperation, I think will ensure that we design programs and services in the future that actually meet the needs that real people have for doing real jobs.

Another interviewee concurred:

> We need to do more . . . not just simply more co-op., but more . . . direct link-ups with the resources of the community . . . used both as a classroom and as a teaching method, where there are resources that we can never really bring into the building, it's too expensive to do that and it's not sometimes a very good way of delivering the training. Why not go out to where the real world is already functioning.

Thus, the interviewees identified the need to articulate an institutional definition of student success to improve data collection for identifying the student population. In addition to introducing mentor programs in a more systematic manner, participants believed it is important to respond to students' "real" needs for job skills and training determined by changing labour market demands.

VI. Current Trends

To determine the impact of current trends on student success, interviewees were asked to comment on rising tuition rates, high unemployment, burgeoning enrollments, and growth of new institutions.

Tuition Rates

Many people interviewed agreed rising "tuition fees can be perceived as a barrier to access. Whether it truly is or not is a debatable issue" with many strong arguments about its real impact on student success.

> Rising tuition rates are problematic because . . . their symbolic power is vastly higher than the actual dollars involved. We could double our student fees tomorrow ... [creating] a huge . . . fire storm, publicly, and politically with students and . . . the sense of injury ... "Ahhh, the end of the world has come." ... Rising tuition fees make people feel depressed and the marginal can't come so they vanish so you are in a steeply regressive model. Thus, everybody lands up being white, Anglo-Saxon, nineteen years old with clean fingernails and is the daughter or son of a lawyer. That's a cutting extreme version of that line of thought.

However, one person noted:

> I've seen no evidence that rising tuition fees in fact markedly change student personnel. We don't suddenly see poor people vanishing from this place when we raise student fees 10%. We don't suddenly see a vanishing of 35 year old welfare mothers or whatever . . . There are changes to our student personnel over the years but they are very slow, very incremental. I think [they] have a lot more to do with population demographics than our student fee rates.

One person noted popular rhetoric about "value for money" and the pressure to work hard for something one is paying for.

> The other extreme is "Let's jack up the student fees because everybody knows if people pay a fair amount of money for student fees, they really respect what you're doing, they work hard".

Although this person did not know what the effect rising tuition would have on student success, the question elicited interesting reflections on the multiple roles students often assume.

> Often when I see students on probation, they're on probation because they're trying to go to school, they're taking too many courses, and they're working two and three jobs. So you add up the number of hours that they do in a week, [and] there's not enough hours in the week. So tuition rates rise, it's going to give those students more pressure to work more so they can pay tuition which will probably in some ways take away from their success.

In general however, most of those interviewed did not think rising tuition becomes "much of a problem, particularly in the community colleges where tuition is a small component of the total cost. It's a very symbolic one, a very political one, but in reality I don't think it make much difference."

High Unemployment

One person speculated on the impact of high unemployment on student success but noted the lack of empirical evidence.

> I would think that high unemployment would put the pressure on students to be more job oriented in studies, more serious, more concerned to come out with courses and the marks in the fields of study for those few jobs that are available. That's the theory. Is that what actually happens in practice? I'm not sure. It can work the other way around that there's no jobs out there so you might as well go hang around school a little bit longer, delay graduation, pick up a few more courses, but it keeps mom and dad off your back if you're at school rather than living on UIC.

Another interviewee concurred:

> I would say that there seems to be a general belief that high unemployment creates a lot of nervous tension a lot of anxiety about the future that results in students that work very, very hard to do well in order to give themselves marginal benefit. I suspect that there is probably some substance to that.

One person reflected on the consequences of fewer jobs rather than unemployment.

> I think that affects student success because if they're here in the program and they have a focus to learn that content of the program . . . in order to graduate and go and get a job in that field, I think they're focused and they're going to be much more concerned about being successful in the program [instead of] thinking "What's the difference, I'm going to graduate, and I'm still not going to get a job." So I see that as being the big issue.

One interviewee discussed the role and responsibilities of this college in light of changing economic realities. This person pointed out that the institution had to learn who the unemployed returning to school were and why they were unemployed in order to then determine "what kinds of things given their background and training might lead them into the type of employment or whatever that they're seeking."

> All of those things I think are the responsibilities of institutions to look at and not just with respect to the concept but the actual people that are unemployed, in reshaping the way that we deal with curriculum, with the instruction and a whole number of other variables where we probably as institutions are going to have to be much more flexible than we've ever been.

Thus, the need to respond to changing labour force demands and "what that means in relation to education and training institutions" was seen as "an integral part of what student success is all about."

Burgeoning Enrollments

One administrator stated that "actually, enrollments aren't burgeoning, because enrollments in colleges are controlled. If you said burgeoning demand, it might be an interesting thing to pursue." Still some people commented that because of the high demand for some courses compared with the available number of seats, students often were forced to extend the length of time required to complete a program.

> We're just getting huge bottle necks and traffic jams and students taking four years to do what should be a two year program. That inevitably creates some attrition, jus. simple time, plus students get into courses they're not particularly interested in but they're sort of related and the credits would count, or it lets them have the minimum nine credits for their student loan, or . . . keep their student number, or they get an instructor who would not have been a first choice.

According to some personnel, the open-door philosophy of the community college was threatened by the increased demand for access.

> What is it that the institution stands for, how does it define itself, what are its values, what is its mission statement? . . . Given that, the relation to students success, something that I have noticed with the burgeoning enrollment or demand problem is that many institutions whose mission or perceived mission at least, is to provide access and opportunity have become very elitist and very traditional and started to really use things like GPA and the concept of grading . . . to become things that they probably never intended to be in the first place.

Another interviewee concurred:

> We have to start recognizing, we may not be able to serve everybody, or at least we have to be very careful about whose needs we can actually meet within the resources that we have.

A somewhat more positive look at burgeoning enrollments or demand was noted:

> I believe that a perception of demand, a perception of being fortunate of getting in probably has a marginal positive effect on motivation, even though we're essentially a first come first serve institution, there's still a sense of exclusivity if there's big lineups outside.

Although burgeoning enrollments appear to be the problem, personnel commented that increased demand for post-secondary programs is the real issue.

Emergence of the University Colleges

The potential threat to the values and philosophy of the community college was also raised when individuals discussed the emergence of the university colleges.

> As long as they keep their distance, we're okay. In providing that the values of the university, don't start taking over the values of the community college. And in some cases I think that some of the university colleges, have managed to do that very well, in other cases, I think that they have become mini-universities and that elitist traditional value system is replacing the values of the community college.

Others identified them as potentially having a positive impact on access and, therefore, success.

> I guess that comes back to the question . . . "How do you define success?" The emergence of the university colleges will definitely increase the volume of students throughout the province achieving degrees. If you define the achievement of degrees per head of student population as success, unquestionably it will create success.
>
> The emergence of the university colleges, I think, is from where I see it's going to give our students a place to go, and some of the students I see here are very uncomfortable going to a huge university.

The opportunities for further education in a greater variety of fields was also seen as a potential benefit of the university colleges. As one faculty member commented, "The majority of our students, I would think 90%, would go on and get a degree if that was a good linking for them."

University of Northern British Columbia

College personnel pointed out that the University of Northern British Columbia was also a way to increase access for students, although as a new institution it was thought to be too early to tell what kind of an impact it would have: "It's a small institution. The reality is provincially it's not going to make much of a difference. It's looking at 1500 students and we have 60,000 or something like that in the college system. Nonetheless, one individual echoed positive statements of other participants by saying,

> "UNBC has worked out a very collaborative and cooperative arrangement with the colleges that . . . will go a long way in the future to addressing the needs of students to successfully be able to articulate, transfer, ladder, all of those programs with the university."

In addition,

> UNBC has attempted certainly in the design of its student services for example, to try to take a look at "How do you help students in the nineties."

In general the interviewees either did not comment on the new university or reserved comment until the University of Northern British Columbia was better established.

Conclusion

The community college philosophy of providing access to and serving the needs of the regional community members was clearly reflected in the attention given issues of student success. It was recognized that the community college served a diverse group of people with equally diverse goals and needs. The importance of addressing this diversity was reflected in the interviewees inclusive student-centred definitions of student success.

However, the realities of fiscal restraint, ever increasing demand for access to specific courses and greater pressure for accountability focused attention away from those student-centred definitions to definitions that tied student success more closely with retention. The necessity to reduce attrition in specific program areas spawned a number of success initiatives which took the form of curricular and programme changes as well as attempts to raise the profile of retention issues by fostering a "success culture."

The general lack of useful data on college student demographics and what they wanted and expected from their college was noted by five of the six people interviewed. It was recognized that as the economic realities of the region were changing so too were the students seeking access to college services. To be responsive to both government and community demands for access and accountability, post-secondary institutions, such as this community college, would need to conduct more and better research.

3. MAPPING REALITIES AT A UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

The second institution highlighted in this report is the university college site. A description of the university college and its current "student success" programs is presented, the action research process is recounted, and the findings are examined for both focus group and personnel interviews.

The University College

This university college, formerly a two-year college, was established in April 1974. Having grown from an "institution" where classes were held in church basements, schools, and other available facilities, today, it encompasses five campuses. In September 1993, 6,131 students were enrolled: 5,038 in academic programs and 1,093 in continuing education and vocational programs. The average age of students is 26.7, and 60% of the student population is female. Furthermore, approximately 76% of students enrolled who answered the university college *Student Registrant Survey* indicated they worked during the semester.

The university college is a commuter campus and attracts students both from around and outside the Lower Mainland as well as local adults and high school students who are seeking a certificate, diploma, or university degree. However, 76% of the students live in the college region. In addition, the college offers English Language Training, Adult Special Education, Adult Basic Education, Native Programs, Office Careers, Vocational Training, Aviation, Nursing, and Continuing Education.

From its inception, the college has taken seriously its mandate to work and act as a partner with the local community. In addition to public lectures and general interest courses, the university college has entered into a number of educational partnerships with all of the surrounding communities to provide education to diverse groups. The vision of the college is reflected in its mission statement:

> The mission of the college is to provide adult learners and the communities of our region with leadership in the delivery of education, training and related services needed to learn, live, and work successfully in a rapidly changing world.

Foremost, as a community college, its primary commitment is to its students and not to publishing or research. The administration and faculty are committed and dedicated to their students. Thus, their overriding concern is to teaching. This is evident in faculty evaluations and, more importantly, in hiring procedures. When new faculty are hired, they are told that the institutional commitment is to teaching and to the students. This became even more apparent when the institution was in the process of becoming a four year university college -- it did not forget this premise. To date, the college still remains proud of and committed to its true and primary purpose and what it sees as its distinctive excellence:

> Our distinctive excellence is our ability to focus on excellence in teaching and learning, to sustain an open, collegial climate, and to collaborate internally and externally in responding creatively to change.

Moreover, faculty, staff, and administrators seek ways to enhance learning for students inside and outside the classroom through other services. They initiated novel programs for students as early as 1989 (*e.g.*, a Writing Centre) long before student success materialized as formal courses or as a policy concern for the Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour.

Programs Promoting "Student Success"

Throughout its history, the university college's faculty, staff, and administrators have sought to implement programs and policies to assist students in their academic and, in some cases, personal endeavours. These initiatives have been used to complement the commitment to teaching excellence in the classroom. Although some services like the library and counselling may not appear novel, employees of the college have sought to make these programs unique to address the needs of its particular students. Some recent program initiatives include the Writing Centre, computing labs, Math Centre, and most recently, the Assessment Centre, improved library services, and programs within departments. Since student success has become topical province-wide, other services and programs have appeared: a student success committee, student success courses, college policy statements, a mentoring program for first year arts students, and inclusion of students on college committees.

Courses for "Student Success"

Faculty in various programs throughout the university college have identified a need for alerting students to the skills and tools they will find useful to enter their chosen academic and career fields. Prior to student success becoming a provincial interest, instructors and administrators had implemented courses, primarily within career areas, to promote student success within their disciplines. Criminology 129 --Personal, Academic, and Professional Development; Business 100 -- Professional Development Seminars; and Rapid Reading and Study Skills 099 have a ten year history of providing students with helpful skills and strategies for surviving in a post-secondary institution.

The Sample

Eight full time students, three women and five men, ranging in ages from 19 to 46, participated in weekly or bi-weekly audio-taped focus groups from October, 1993, until April, 1994. Originally, the study was to end in December of 1993; however, students requested that the study be extended for the entire academic year, totalling fifteen focus group meetings. The frequency of the 45 to 60 minute group meetings was determined by consensus based on student availability influenced by academic and personal pressures, such as exam, term paper, and work schedules.

Since the Criminal Justice Program had volunteered to participate in the "Mapping Study," first year Criminology program students were recruited from the Criminology 129 course previously mentioned. Five students enrolled directly from Grade 12 into the Criminal Justice Program and three had previously attended community colleges, worked full time, attended high school and held part-time jobs, or had been seeking employment. Of the eight students, two were married and had children. Two students commuted from New Westminster while two others had moved from cities outside the Lower Mainland to attend the university college. During their previous academic careers, three students were average students, and four were above average. In addition to Criminology 129, students were enrolled together in other courses. Additionally, students met to socialize and study together outside the focus group sessions. Two students commuted together. Some of these relationships were nurtured due to the action research group

The following description provided by the researcher at the first focus group meeting illustrates the principles and spirit of action research in which students were asked to participate throughout the study. From the outset, students were aware that the project was theirs to direct and shape in collaboration with the researcher. The students were encouraged to voice their concerns about their experiences within the group, through their journals, or in their telephone conversations with the researcher, and even within their informal network which evolved between the group members over the course of the term. Based on her past experiences with first year college, adult basic education, and literacy students, the researcher anticipated that students might be reluctant "to bother" helpful people or seek out college resources meant to assist students. Thus, she acted as a resource person, but more importantly as an advocate/facilitator and, perhaps, a mentor in acting as a conduit for students to meet people who could help quell their fears as students or guide them in their academic work by speaking to specific questions and working with the group in a more informal setting where they could voice their fears and concerns. The facilitator did not solve problems for the students, but helped them see that they did have a voice and assisted them to be more empowered to navigate through first year. Thus, together the group and the researcher explored the perspective of how the first year Criminology students felt they survived or thrived during their first two terms.

Since the first focus group was held in October, the students had been in school for a month. Thus, when the group met for the first time, the meeting became a brainstorming session about issues they had identified during their first month of classes. The brainstorming turned into the following initial questions which led to others and were answered throughout the term:

How can I become a successful student?
What do I need to become a successful student?
What is available to help me become a successful student?

What do I need to succeed in this program?
How can I gain the skills to succeed in this program?
What is available in the program to help me become a successful student?

How did I choose this program?
How did I choose this institution?
What does this institution offer me afterwards?
What does this program offer me afterwards?

Results of the University College Focus Group

During the action research group meetings, many answers to the first year students' questions emerged from focus group discussions, including peer networking, journals, seminar workshops, and action problem-solving. The quest and motivation to understand their first year experience was reflected in the transcribed group discussions and in the direction the group took to look at issues of concern to them during their first year and, in particular, their first semester. Overall, the students worked together as a cohesive social network of peers undergoing a similar experience.

In addition to participating in the action research group, the students had other classes together, socialized and maintained contact outside class, and formed friendships. Throughout their first year experience, the students discussed their own plight, concerns, and interests; however, their consideration of first year experiences went well beyond this group. They also wanted to help other students learn from the action research group's experience. Thus, this cohort made suggestions that they hoped would ultimately benefit and assist other students succeed, particularly in first year.

The following sections are divided into four themes: educational choices and life choices, acquiring voice to overcome barriers to access resources for success, transition into the academic experience, and looking back and looking forward: assessing the academic experience. The following sections include barriers, resources, actions, changes, learning, and successes the students experienced from October 1993 to April 1994.

I. Educational Choices and Life Choices

Reasons for Participating in the Action Research

To understand better the perspective of a varied group of first year students, the researcher asked participants to indicate their particular rationale for joining the group. Resource people were equally curious why students had joined, for participation in groups outside required studies seemed outside prevailing practice at the institution. Several reasons were provided for volunteering:

> It sounded interesting.
>
> I joined the group because I . . . just wanted to see . . . what it was like to be a part of a research project.
>
> Anything that'll make it easier.
>
> I figured it would help me get control in my first year.
>
> My reason for taking this was just to see if it could give me any advantage.

Thus, these students were seeking strategies to survive successfully the first year experience and stay in the program.

The Purpose of Education and Relationship to Selection of Institution

The research group had a significant investment in succeeding for a number of reasons. First, two students had made the decision to move to the Lower Mainland to attend this particular Criminology program. Second, the majority had specifically evaluated the utility of Criminology programs throughout the Lower Mainland to determine whether the institutional and program goals matched their career choices after graduating with a diploma or a degree.

> It's easier to get a job after you get out . . . , so it seems to be a better program to be into, I think.

About half of the students knew they wanted a blend of theory and practice rather than a degree specifically focusing on theory. They wanted a practical career. Two students had a significant investment in the program; they had taken time off to work to evaluate their careers before they became full time students. As one person stated,

> I took two years off too . . . I guess I needed that time, really, to see what there was out there, and to decide that when I came out of high school . . . [to] find what I would be interested in.

Fourth, other students had consciously chosen Criminology as a career and had decided to return to school even though they had been only average students in high school. Returning with a goal provided a different perspective:

> Doing well, and that is an attainable goal, even for people who . . . didn't know where you were going and didn't have any goals really, but here you've gone through some of the processes [and] have goals.

Thus, all individuals in the group had carefully chosen the institution to match their career and educational values and goals. Additionally, at least three students felt they were being given a second chance to do well since they had only been marginal students in high school. They were quite happy and relieved that they had the opportunity to succeed in a career program of their choice. Therefore, they were much more concerned about surviving their academic experience in a setting that was reputed to be considerably more demanding than high school.

Student Success and the Institution's Reputation

In addition to identifying a relationship between students' career goals and the institution's educational goals, participants believed a dynamic existed between their success and the institution's reputation and vice versa. This perception was reinforced by entrance criteria and the selection interview, program orientation, and behaviour codes used to screen students.

> Well, I didn't really like the interview idea at first, but the fact they do have one, and it's more selective or something, and they had an orientation session that everyone had to come to when we first started the Criminology Program.

According to the students, these criteria had a purpose and the success of students would reflect on the institution. Furthermore, students believed their relationship with the institution would not end upon their completion of a degree or diploma. Participants realized the connection would endure longer than they may have originally anticipated.

> The institution's invested in you as well.

> They're protecting their reputation.

> Success isn't just doing well with your grades, but how you behave afterwards in whatever field of employment you're going into.

Since a long term and enduring affiliation would ensue, all of these students had thoughtfully evaluated their relationship with the institution. Moreover, they commented that this relationship was dynamic and both parties had a responsibility to each other: the students were to be successful and graduate, and the institution would provide resources for success so that the students could graduate.

All students in the action research group felt that to succeed, they must take some of the responsibility for doing well and getting through the first year. Although the group believed the institution also had a responsibility to provide resources for success, ultimately the students were responsible for accessing the services provided. As one person pointed out,

> if the institution's willing to meet you half way, they will make . . . things available. . . . [but] your personal responsibility is still there.

Thus, the students believed that a two-way responsibility must exist between the institution and the students: the institution must provide adequate resources to assist students in succeeding; however, the student has a responsibility to take advantage of and use the resources provided.

Accessibility of Institution

In addition to their future association with the institution, students were concerned about their immediate comfort within the university college. To complement their educational and career goals, students had selected the college for its accessibility.

> Finding classes on the first day was easy, because the institution's fairly small right now, whereas my friends who go to like [another institution], you hear their horror stories about trying to find parking in the morning and classes, and I found it's really easy, that way.

Furthermore, they found the size of both the institution and classes and atmosphere in general much more comfortable than a larger academic institution. As one person stated,

> Well, first I like this school; it's pretty comfortable to me, like the atmosphere in here. I found at [other institutions] . . . I wandered around there for a while, it's more [impersonal] . . . it's not so [big] this is more comfortable.

Thus, these students indicated that their success was influenced by much more than just showing up at an institution and registering for courses.

II. Acquiring Voice to Overcome Barriers to Access Resources for Success

Initially, when the action research students joined the group, they, like many first year students, did not voice complaints about barriers they found within the institution. Moreover, they knew about student success resources, but they did not actively seek them out.

Resources for Success

As mentioned previously, the university college has many resources available to students to aide them in their academic endeavours. These strategies for success range from workshops on stress and career planning to how to prepare for and write exams. Moreover, the college offers many services, such as the counselling, library, and writing and math centres to assist students throughout their education.

Library

At the outset of the action research project, the group was satisfied with the university college's library. However, by mid-term, they began to encounter frustrating and seemingly overwhelming barriers to their success in their program. In fact, the small size of the institution which many had praised turned into a barrier in the form of the library. Students complained that limited library resources impinged on their ability to complete research assignments. Although library use started out as a simple suggestion at the end of the first focus group meeting when the researcher asked for issues that the group wanted to address, library resources became a central issue for the group for a number of weeks.

> I wouldn't mind just a little thing about how to make the best use of the library. I'm lacking in library skills.

Students were particularly concerned about the accessibility of the material.

> At times it is intimidating; I know it's frustrating, especially with the size of the library, the actual number of articles available.
>
> Yeah, it seems as if, regardless of what subject you choose, all available information is gone somewhere else. Somebody else already signed it out, or whatever is available is not current or has to do with another country, especially if you're trying to focus on let's say a Canadian, a recent Canadian article. They're usually gone.

Other students commented that they had had tours in other courses. However, others indicated that although they knew they needed a tour they could not get one since the tours were all reserved for classes. Unlike some institutions, at the time of the study the university college did not have individual or walk-in group tours for library use.

At the end of the session, the students had identified an issue that was a concern to all. Based on these concerns, a library tour was arranged for the group so they too could access information they felt necessary for their own research.

Not only did the size and accessibility of the materials and knowledge of the staff affect the students, but also the limit on the interlibrary loans hampered the efforts of the students; they needed more than the allowable limit of three items per course. However, the idea of going to another university library presented severe hardship for students in extra costs in time, effort, transportation, photocopying, and knowledge of the services available in those libraries. These points generated heated discussions and great concerns about the impact of their ability to use other libraries.

> I am finding a lot of the times when I do go to an instructor with my problems about findings things in the library, I have been getting a lot of, "Well why don't you go into UBC or the Justice Institute or Simon Fraser?"

A couple of students followed this advice; however, the issue of access was still not solved as they recounted:

> We went to Simon Fraser, and I found that . . . [with] big libraries like that . . . I don't have a clue where to look, and just walk in the door and I didn't know there was . . . seven floors or something.
>
> Well, I went there and I had a hell of a time trying to find anything.
>
> Not user friendly.

Despite the ability of some students to go to SFU, others did not have the option to drive to SFU or to pay to use the SFU library.

> Yeah, it's expensive to get there, and you have to arrange . . . practically a whole day to stay out there, and you have to stay in the library, plus you were saying about the library cards, you know, you have to pay $50 for a library card, they don't give you change in the library .
>
> So you pretty much have to photocopy everything. Or stay there for hours and write everything down.

After hearing the concerns of the students, the facilitator asked the students what they could do aside from having a library tour. She wanted to know how the students could alert the college, instructors, and policymakers to the students' problems. Thus, the group began brainstorming possible solutions and actions they could take to alleviate the library problem. Initially, their response was "Well really, we're (only) first year students." However, as the researcher encouraged them to take charge, they came up with innovative solutions.

A lighthearted, but sincere, thought by the group was to "kidnap" "one of those students [in the library] that you see in there sometimes and they seem to have [using the library] just down." However, their point was that perhaps students need library buddies to help first year students with learning how to use the library.

One solution was to "arrange some bus tours for Simon Fraser." Another fellow said he would talk with one of the instructors to see if such a tour was possible during one of their class periods. To make a case for the tour and, perhaps, changing policy, the students decided to corroborate their case with facts.

> Maybe if it is a big issue, we can just have everybody who is interested in that issue just try to record the expense that they're putting out because of this [loan] policy.

Furthermore, students unanimously agreed that in the future, a bus service could be made available between campuses as well as to the universities to help provide access between campuses and libraries. It might even become a social event to get to know other students.

Although a formal SFU library tour could not be arranged, an instructor from their program indicated that if people went to the SFU library on their own, he could meet students to help them with the library. Another solution the students suggested was

> Perhaps, there would be some way of having our library cards transferable to Simon Fraser, or have the libraries linked so that it is not an interlibrary loan; it's just an extension loan from the Simon Fraser library.

Additionally, the students suggested trying to get materials faxed to them and establishing more accessible and better communication links between the universities and colleges in the Lower Mainland.

As a result of this session, the students had highlighted the key issues around the library. They had also discovered that they could identify concerns, problem-solve, and take different forms of action. Thus, they had decided on some possible actions to take and had identified some areas of the library and research issues that the librarian could discuss. Additionally, the researcher related the students' concerns to the librarian so the tour could be specifically prepared for the group to address their complaints.

After the librarian gave the tour, the students were thankful for his help and the information that he was able to emphasize. In particular, the librarian provided quick tips for choosing and researching a topic.

Consequently, the students were very pleased with the librarian's session. Throughout the remainder of the term, the students told the researcher that they did go down to ask the librarian for assistance and that he was extremely helpful to them. Thus, the actions taken by the group, facilitator, and librarian had proved beneficial. In the ensuing weeks, other changes occurred in the library: individualized and on demand group library tours were instituted into the library; more printed instructions were posted near computers on how to use the resource; and more information was disbursed in the college newspaper about new acquisitions and resources for both faculty and students.

In addition to addressing the issue of access to library resources, the group requested information about turning research materials into written assignments. Thus, an exploration of the Writing Centre ensued. Although the college has a Writing Centre available for all students, and staff go to classrooms throughout the college at the beginning of the year, hand out pamphlets, and tell students to go to the Writing Centre for help, often students, especially first year, do not access these resources. Even though the staff are very friendly and welcoming, students are often nervous about going into the Centre alone. Moreover, despite the informational pamphlet and recruitment efforts of the staff, students do not necessarily know the questions they want to ask, nor do they really know what is available from the Centre and staff. Many still have the "misconception that it's for remedial students". However, "There's a handful of really bright students who score really high. . .marks who've figured out that the way to do it is to go to the Writing Centre because they'll help." Students who access the Centre tend to be those who have used it previously or who have been taken by a peer. Thus, although many first year students know they need guidance and advice, they tend to avoid entering the Writing Centre. As the action research group sessions progressed, this became evident. As one student pointed out,

> It's almost like flying blind for your first essay because you don't know . . . what they want for the most part, so . . . you'll get it back and then you'll find out. I guess that's the only way -- trial and error.

Others said that they had general, but vague, outlines of instructors' expectations for assignments; however, this was not specific enough. Furthermore, at least three students indicated they had "tons" of material on essay writing, but this wasn't enough -- they needed guidance.

> I had virtually tons of books on essay writing. A practical stylist from a previous course. . . . It's nice when you read about something and say, "Oh yeah, this is the shape of an essay,". These are the ways most people have them . . . laid out. But taking an idea of your own and then actually writing it out, you get very confused.
>
> Perhaps, it's just practice. Maybe we're all supposed to feel this in the initial stages, like first year. Hopefully, it gets a little easier with experience.

Aside from their worries about their abilities, the problem was compounded by the weight and number of the assignments. All agreed -- "I've never written so much in my life." A substantial part of marks were based on writing worth 30-40% of the entire course which caused even greater anxiety over their ability to perform and to cope. To help alleviate these concerns, the researcher suggested a tour to the Writing Centre and indicated that the Centre might be a useful resource, for she knew that many instructors put good examples of student writing from their courses into the Writing Centre as a resource. Additionally, she suggested the students discuss with instructors the specific criteria, instructions, and guidelines for the written assignments and ask if the instructors would go over student papers before they were handed in. Several students had attempted to consult instructors, but they were not pleased with the results. Often instructors did not establish clear criteria before papers were due or changed the requirements. Students voiced concern:

> Plus, you have to worry about style, what they . . . consider good sources and . . . because each instructor has a different perception of style you have to figure out for at least six instructors what she or he considers to be good style and sources.
>
> It's the student's responsibility to find out for sure, but the instructor kind of has to. . . set some guidelines, because they were pretty vague.

Some of these suggestions were new although they had considered others. To resolve the issue, some students thought they might drop the courses and then take them later. One student offered to help another who was having real difficulties with some tips on writing and reviewing the essays. Thus, in addition to the group seeking to access college resources, they began to use each other as peer resources. As the group progressed throughout the term, their willingness to help and support each other became more pronounced. They even began socializing and meeting outside class and the focus groups.

The Writing Centre "tour" seminar proved to be helpful in a number of ways. First, the students met a faculty member face-to-face in an informal setting to address their specific writing needs. Furthermore, the faculty member was extremely friendly and sensitive to their needs as first year students and brought handouts and information sheets about the Writing Centre and on outlining and structuring essays.

Through the "tours," students were learning more about their own problem-solving abilities, academic strengths, and the resources available to them within the college and within the group. Moreover, the students learned to take pleasure in the success and accomplishments of their peers in the focus group.

III. Transition into the Academic Experience

Most first year students experience an initial transition period into academic life. The university college focus group participants were no different.

High School Expectations vs. College Expectations

Participants had not foreseen nor even expected some of the frustrations they might experience during their first year. For example, more than half of the group did not even know what they did not know. They had not anticipated college as much different from high school. Thus, for many, the first semester in college was a frustrating and eye-opening experience.

> It is different from high school. You know you'll have to manage your time, your workload . . . your instructor will not say, "Well this is what you have to do and this is how you have to do it," and sort of take your hand, walk you through everything.

Many students were unprepared for the intensity of the workload while they were taking a full course load consisting of five to six subjects.

> The first semester [of the program] you're supposed to take six courses compared to any other courses that are five, maximum, there's six here. The emphasis on research, it's almost like basic training for the military, . . . they don't care necessarily if you do a proper push up ten times; they just want you to do hundred sloppy ones just to get you into shape.

Furthermore, in addition to the myriad of assignments, students found the emphasis on research at a first year level overwhelming.

> We've had the midterms and now we've just had the finals. For 103, we have 40% on the literature review, and for 129 we have a literature review and a book review, and for another course we have . . . to write an essay for the 22nd, and that's 210.
>
> I've never written so much in my life. I'm amazed.

The students found that time management became a key issue for their survival during their first semester. Not only did they need to allocate time for studying, writing, and completing assignments, but they also were required to devote time to research. Many felt obligated to reevaluate how they divided time between the different activities. Additionally, they began to understand why time management was so crucial to their success and why it was discussed in their courses as well as in other seminars and workshops.

At the initial orientation and throughout the term, instructors emphasized the importance of time management to accommodate the workload they knew the students would encounter. Instructors warned students that time required for coursework was similar to a job.

> They said treat it as a job . . . eight hours a day.
>
> If you did that you'd go crazy.
>
> I don't know anyone who spends eight hours a day.
>
> I don't know where they get their figures, but it's really kind of . . . like that could scare people from coming to school when it's really not like that.

However, students felt that instructors should coordinate assignments.

> The teachers . . . just give out what they have to do and what they want done, and it's up to us to organize our time, but it's a big problem.

Thus, during the first semester students had to reconcile new ways of thinking about workload, assignments, and time management.

Expectations and Quality of Work

Furthermore, expectations of students were quite different in first year than in high school. In addition to the volume of research and workload, students found the quality of their written assignments was quite different.

> From what I remember an essay in high school was about 500 to 750 words, and it was basic. . . . [Here] it's different. Using . . . your own ideas with research that you're doing for critical essays and trying to organize it all to something coherent.

Many students had become accustomed to regurgitating information back to teachers in high school.

> Like most essays, high school type essays are actually lit reviews. Same idea, no original thought, just finding out . . . term paper type things.

However, now, students found they had to critically analyze, organize, and synthesize material in order to present an argument based on research. This was a new and overwhelming experience, for many were not sure about the process required.

> I'm very frustrated when it comes to essays. I've got 30 different pieces of paper with one idea here and the other matching idea is on this one because . . . I sort of pre-write, just trying to get ideas down and just . . . by the time I'm finished I have so much paper all over the place.

Other students empathized, for they faced the same problem.

> And you just give up.
>
> And I'm going, "Now, I've got to organize this. Oh, it's a nice day. Gee, I think I'll go outside."

Many students were unaware before they attended first year that the quality and presentation of assignments would be different.

> Like in a lot of the programs now they expect it to be typed. They won't accept handwritten projects, whereas in high school you could just use loose leaf paper, duo-tang paper, write something down, you'd get a mark for it.

Furthermore, many did not even know that page numbers were needed for research papers. Often, they were unsure of which sources could be used to substantiate papers.

> That we weren't supposed to use that or we weren't supposed to use newspapers .
>
> We weren't allowed to use our textbook.

Therefore, students were overloaded with new expectations while adjusting to first year.

Plagiarism

Perhaps the issue that generated the most extreme concern in the initial meeting of the research group was the subject of plagiarism. Most students were astonished at what they felt was an over concern by the instructors with plagiarism and crediting sources of research. For many, the discussion during the orientation and all of their classes was the first they had heard of the notion of stealing ideas of others. In high school, plagiarism was a common and ostensibly tolerated practice.

> They don't encourage them, but they don't take up strict policies to prevent them from doing it in the first place.
>
> It's definitely more tolerated, anyway.

At college, however,

> [If] you cheat; you're out.
>
> I think it's [plagiarism] one of those feared things, like if you get caught plagiarizing it can be the end of your career, so to speak, as a student, and people are nervous about that.

The students felt that less threatening information was needed on plagiarism, for they were terrified about it since they could be expelled from the institution and program for even unwittingly copying work.

Stress

The workload, expectations, and lack of information and resources resulted in an inordinate amount of stress for the students. Originally, many had indicated they felt no real pressure since they imagined they just needed practice in managing time and becoming accustomed to the demands of first year. However, later during "crunch time" when all the assignments were due, students began to talk more about stress. Two students were veterans of the health profession where they had to deal with life and death situations. Their reaction to the stress of being first year students, even though one had previously attended different colleges successfully and the other had earned a degree in another institution, reflects the feelings of many students:

> The stress you get from the ambulance is just like that and then it's over, and I can handle that, and I can handle stress. . . . I'm finding more here in a first year [program]. It's been a really bad experience for me.

> I sit here thinking this is just like a Saturday night in an emergency room. I was a nurse for 20 years. It's just that it seems like a lot of stuff has been coming due all at the same time . . . if it was spread out a little bit better, it would have been a little bit easier to . . . do a good job . . . It does make it hard to make it good. Especially if you're concerned about quality..

Other students coped with stress differently.

> I don't know how to explain how we manage the stress. I don't think there's too much management of it; you just do what you have to do.
>
> I think we haven't had . . . enough time to actually sit down and think, "How do we do it?"

Still others had another view of how to cope with the stress of first year.

> Learn the experience . . . That's why I would stay with [the course] unless you're sure you're going to fail, and then if that's happening, withdraw or audit.
>
> Yeah, once I get my last test and my next test mark, depending on what it is, that will be probably the deciding factor as to what [I do].
>
> Go to that teacher and say I'm thinking I'm having to drop your class, and I'm sure they will do everything they can to make you able to pass it.

Thus, before the end of the term, students were feeling the pressures of first year and were trying to learn to survive the experience with diverse strategies.

Perceptions of Teachers/Instructors/Professors

From the outset, the students' perceptions of university college and college instructors were quite different than their speculations about university professors. The students felt the instructors were friendlier.

> The teachers are nice. I like all my teachers. [They're] easy to get along with. [They're all different though] some give more workloads than others, some more reading.
>
> [The teachers here] seem to be more personal.

The group felt the faculty were much more accessible than university professors. This was partly attributed to the smaller size of the institution. However, a certain perception about the "persona" of university professors prevailed.

> [When I think of university professors, I think of] just some old guy that's rigid or something.

> Wacko.
>
> Yeah, a guy who smokes a pipe.
>
> Also, you think of just huge classes where there's one I guess prof down there, this huge [lecture theatre], like 300 people in one class.

In addition to less access to university professors, students concluded that they might not even be able to see the professors, for frequently teaching duties are taken over by teaching assistants. In contrast, some college faculty shared their home telephone numbers with students.

Although the students found the instructors to be friendlier and more personal, they did encounter problems with lack of clarity about assignments. For example,

> We don't really know what each instructor [wants], I guess the easiest thing is to ask, but sometimes . . .you don't always get the clearest details from . . . even going to talk to [them].
>
> Yeah, that was sort of a two-way street . . . it's the student's responsibility to find out for sure, but the instructor . . . has to set some guidelines because they were pretty vague.

Sometimes students realized communication problems existed, but they did not always have the time to contest the issue.

One fellow was thinking of dropping a course, and the facilitator encouraged him to discuss his concerns with the instructor and use the instructor as a resource, for faculty are aware of alternatives students do not know exist. The student did go see the instructor again. Also, another faculty member offered advice. Thus, the students were learning who to access for help with their concerns. Moreover, they were becoming aware that instructors noticed more about their students than the students knew, as is evident from this discussion:

> They do notice things. Like . . . who is the best note taker in the class? They notice it. . . . They don't walk around the class looking, like in elementary school, see who takes the best notes, they just [know] from [observing]. So they may look like they're not really paying attention, but they do.

Although miscommunication could develop with instructors in the classroom, overall, students began to see instructors as extremely caring and useful resources to access during the program.

IV. Looking Back and Looking Forward: Assessing the Academic Experience

Once the research project and first year were over, students began to plan their next term of the academic endeavour. These students maintained that the first term would affect the next term significantly in their planning and goals.

Students' Perception of the First Year

At the conclusion of the first year and of the project, the group reflected upon the term to voice their thoughts on their first year experience. The researcher encouraged them to think about what they had learned during the term and what they would do differently, if anything, the next term and what they would tell new first year students if they could. One person described the first year experience in the following way:

> First semester is a kind of a test to see how well you're doing. If you're getting As and Bs in the first semester, I don't think you have too much to worry about. . . . If you're getting marginal grades . . . you can reevaluate what you've done, . . . so you might survive the first semester, but depending on how you treat . . . a marginal grade the first semester . . . if you then redouble your efforts or try and use more of the strategies which we are discussing . . . then you can compare it with your second semester, and if you're still doing bad then, well, I don't know. But you can sort of use your second semester as kind of like the next test.

Other students understood their first semester differently:

> It's kind of like being born, I guess, it's really painful and distressing, but once you're born . . . you forget all about it.
>
> Yeah, sort of like a backrub for the mind.
>
> You're drowning and you're panicking and then you sort of relax. And then there's this feeling of warmth.

Thus, students believed they had undergone an enormous transformation which was part of the first year process. They felt that despite the anxiety and frustrations the experience had been worth it for them.

> We worked hard.
>
> And I make it through this one, this term, and all my other terms are not going to be as bad as this one. This was a big one.

Most of the students received higher marks in all their classes than they had expected. For their literature review, despite their initial frustrations and anxieties, the marks were quite impressive.

> Like I just didn't know what I was doing. I was surprised.
>
> I thought I was going to be one of those guys that [the instructor] wanted to talk to after or something.

Their worst fears about performing poorly did not transpire, and they all completed their first term with good marks. Since they had received good grades -- “half of us got As” – all of the students expressed opinions on how they could improve.

> I'm just not going to procrastinate as much as I have this term.
>
> Just applying some of the things . . . I left it a little late for this semester, like scheduling . . . a personal timetable. . . . I'm going to start from the beginning of the semester this time. I already have the timetable made up.
>
> And you can get more done if you at least start it a little bit, even if you wait till the last minute [you] started it.

Others had been told by instructors that they could sit in on two sections of the upcoming course if concepts were unclear. That way, if students wanted, they could benefit from repeat exposure to the course content. Furthermore, students reiterated that they would ask more questions.

> Now, we know what to ask, too. Because before I didn't have a clue.

As one person asserted,

> Half of the reason I procrastinated [last term], I believe, was probably because I just didn’t know. I didn’t know what to do so I said, “Oh, I’ll put it off,” but if I would have asked the questions I would have been more able to get going on it.

Moreover, the students believed “You can’t just ask general, `Well what do we do?’ questions.”

The general consensus was to be specific and be brave enough to show ignorance of requirements and instructors’ expectations. Thus, they learned they did have a right to voice their concerns and could take control of their learning by asking questions and requesting clarification from instructors. Moreover, they now knew to ensure that the instructor committed himself or herself to the expectations for assignments so that these would not be changed because the instructor could not remember what she or he had said or because the instructors had decided they wanted a different type of assignment mid-stream. Furthermore, group members had tried different study techniques such as study groups, and they planned to continue those.

When asked by the researcher what the group would recommend to incoming first year students, the group had numerous suggestions. Although many felt there was no real way around the actual experience, they did have some recommendations about practical things that could help students survive, especially in their first term.

> That Learning for Success book, that would be a great book to read for student survival. It's for high school students that are coming into college for the first time, and it's great for that.
>
> Well, I think every first year student is a little lost when they come here. Something like a package on where to find student resources, a study guide.
>
> Just a map of the campus. . . . I mean one that you can stick in your pocket.

Additionally, students suggested that monthly workshops currently printed on large pieces of paper from counselling and other services be printed and circulated on one sheet so the information could be placed in binders, pockets, bags, or purses. Furthermore, the group felt that first year students should be paired with fourth year students so that the fourth year students could help them with the transition into first year -- like a buddy system. Moreover, currently enrolled students could phone new registrants and welcome them to the college. This approach would help put new students at ease. Furthermore, they wanted more input into what students needed to succeed at the college. Additionally, the group wanted library cards that were transferable for all students between the post-secondary institutions in the Lower Mainland.

The researcher wanted to know how the group felt about the action research and if it had been of any assistance to them.

> I appreciated . . . finding other people's views and there were a few points that we brought up here I thought were very relevant to my studies. . . . it was very therapeutic.
>
> That's the way you get over your problems too, sometimes. By identifying them.
>
> Good to talk about things with other students.

Although the students felt they "whined and complained" about issues initially, they did take action in resolving concerns important to them. This group was nudged into taking action to find their collective voice. They learned that even first year students were not powerless, that they could take charge and initiate changes even if the changes were not always the ones they anticipated. Overall, the "tours" provided the students with information that they could not get elsewhere or that they did not know how to access. Moreover, this group did not just think about their first year experience; they became more altruistic and went beyond the group to help other students succeed in their first year by making suggestions for change that would, in fact, help incoming registrants. When students are given a chance to voice their concerns about their own success, they will rise to the occasion, but instructors, counsellors, resource people, and administrators must be willing to hear the students in informal and intimate groups where students can overcome their lack of voice when speaking to those more powerful.

4. UNIVERSITY COLLEGE PERSONNEL FINDINGS

Background

Once focus group sessions had been completed with the first year students at the university college site, interviews were conducted with faculty, administrators, and "success" program staff. The purpose of these discussions was to examine the perceptions of student success and retention of first year students from the perspective of individuals responsible for programming, administering, initiating, or assisting activities within the institution. Furthermore, since the focus of the institution is teaching and the well-being of the student, these interviews could be used to corroborate or raise questions regarding the perceptions of the students in the focus group. Faculty, administrators, and staff were most willing to share their views on the students' first year experience.

Sample

Twelve individuals, nine men and three women were interviewed. The group consisted of six instructors, three administrators, and three support staff. Two of the administrators also taught one course per term. Furthermore, four of the group initiated the student success committee at the university college site while the "Mapping Study" research project was in progress.

Individuals participated separately in hour-long audio-taped semi-structured interviews. The group answered additional queries based on the particular institutional focus, that is, at this site, teaching and relationships with students. The interviews covered perceptions of student success and retention and their measurement, student success programs, tuition costs, high unemployment, burgeoning enrolments, and the emergence of the university colleges and the University of Northern British Columbia.

Due to the emphasis on and importance of teaching at this site, individuals were extremely concerned about the experiences of first year students. Moreover, they were interested in the final outcome of the study from the students' perspective.

Seven themes emerged from the transcript data. These included perceptions of student success and retention, relationship between instructors and student success, "success" programs, institutional evaluation, and other influential trends. Throughout the analysis, these have been divided into sub-themes.

I. Perceptions of Success

When student success became a provincial issue, college personnel showed great interest by attending Ministry seminars and workshops and agreeing to take part in the "Mapping the Realities of First Year Post-Secondary Life" study. Many were interested in "how the institution was doing" from the students' perspective and in improving the climate for student success within the university college. As mentioned previously, the institution had a past history of implementing student success initiatives; thus, as the college transformed into a university college faculty, administrators, and support staff were even more conscious of the welfare of the students. Consequently, an internal student success committee emerged during 1993. The committee could never reach a consensus on a definition for the complex and multi-faceted concept of student success. However, interviewees, some of whom were on the student success committee, were able to provide personal perceptions of student success. Also, they agreed that the definition changed depending upon the context.

Student Success and the Institution

Many individuals interviewed associated student success with the institution. For some it was the access to courses, a post-secondary experience, or completion of a program of study. For others, student success and institutional success were synonymous. For example, after discussing the difficulty of defining success, one administrator noted:

> The difficulty in talking about student success is that there isn't a nice simple one-sentence definition. You're talking about the success of a very wide range of individuals, and they come to us with a whole wide range of different kinds of needs. . . . From my perspective as [an administrator] . . . student success is the same thing, identically the same thing as institutional success, the success of this place.

One instructor pointed out that an institution stands or falls on student success, that is how it compares to or "measures up to" other comparable post-secondary institutions. In some instances, universities, colleges, and university colleges are, in a sense, competing for students. Furthermore, this instructor commented:

> I would say that the institution's definition is that student success is students performing at a comparable level to the academic institutions we compare ourselves to. Are we turning out students whose As, Bs and Cs are comparable to UBC's As, Bs and Cs. . . . [We need to ensure] that we're not calling success something that some other institution would call failure.

For other interviewees, "A successful student is obviously a student we retain," for this student remains at the institution for the educational experience and explores the services available to him or her. Thus, as described by a university college counsellor, the notion of student success is a long, comprehensive, and continuous institutional process beginning with initial contact:

> that starts from the moment that the potential student first makes contact with the institution. . .either in a high school or walking in as an adult. . . . It comes really from the moment that they walk in the door. Typically whether they can find the counselling office

It continues with the experience within the institution:

> If they decide to attend . . . through the process of application and registration, . . . how they feel about that process, the availability of the courses they want, the institution's assessment of their skills and the assistance . . . those assessments . . . has to help them choose their courses before they actually enroll.

And, more importantly, the student's view of his or her success is well in place before classes begin:

> Once the student enrolls it means the kinds of services that are provided inside . . . and outside the classroom to help the student. . .develop the necessary skills to survive in the academic setting. . . . It . . . means what the institution does outside of the classroom to make the student feel comfortable . . . like they belong. . . . Also outside of the classroom the auxiliary support services, like the writing centre, . . . and personal and career counselling.

This counsellor emphasized that institutional support is for students:

> The first year . . . really makes or breaks. In fact it's the first semester that really makes or breaks a student. It's from that initial contact until the (end of the first semester) that's crucial.

Furthermore, administrators, faculty and support staff believe that a student's success continues long after the program of study and beyond to the effect the experience has on the individual's life. Thus, all institutional personnel agreed that student success within the institution reflects the services, assistance, and personal contact by faculty, staff, support services, and administrators. Additionally, administrators and counsellors noted that success in this context encompasses program, course, and institutional access.

Student Success as Career

According to faculty and administrators, concern with the student does not end with graduation; it continues beyond, for many of the university college's programs prepare students for particular careers in the criminal justice system, business, or other practical and technical professions. For example, the primary goal of the career and technical programs is to assist students to find employment through granting of a certificate, diploma, or degree. Part of the process usually includes a "hands-on" practicum. One criminology instructor commented:

> Student success, my understanding, is to move people towards the resources and careerwise, . . . so resources structure the program so that a person . . . graduates through steps on a ladder basis.

Another instructor defined student success more bluntly in terms of

> The hard nosed bottom line definition for the college is that they're-employable after they graduate. And that's an important part of it.

These comments reflected on dimension to the concept of student success.

Student Success in Relation to the Personal and to Society

Although many interviewees acknowledged the importance of student success and its relationship to the job market and employability, other faculty and administrators explored the personal and quality of life side to success. One instructor, teaching academic enhancement strategies, believed initially that success was based on skills for maintaining a GPA. Now, however, she understands student success as a form of empowerment to improve the student's quality of life well beyond the academic experience:

> Student success has to do with the internal changes in the student. . . . Students have to look at what they are doing from a different perspective, or different perspectives, and say, "Yes, I can implement change, I do have some sort of control over my life." So we're talking about . . . changing their personal life.

Another instructor responsible for a "success" support program explained success further beyond the classroom and institution walls by saying:

> Student success could be defined as actually learning the skills and knowledge that they need to function as citizens, as members of the community, as members of a group, and as employable individuals. . . ,well-rounded individuals who had the capacity to think and express themselves, and perform whatever duties that were required to earn a living, at the same time making a contribution to their family and community.

Another instructor responsible for teaching "student success programs" summed up all the definitions inclusively throughout the interviews as:

> Student success, is very multi-faceted. It's academic success, it's personal success, it may even be social success, because that part of the student's life can be dramatically affected according to who they meet in class, how they develop with others in class, how they interact at the academic level in class.

As illustrated by responses from interviewees, the notion of student success possesses many layers of meaning dependent upon the learner, content, and context.

II. Perceptions of Retention

In addition to the importance of student success, throughout the post-secondary institutions in British Columbia, student retention has become an issue of concern for administrators and faculty alike. Interest in retention is partly due to the provincial funding formula based on the number of students remaining in the institution. The apprehension felt by instructors, in part, is related to the emphasis on increased accountability for maintaining numbers of students within classrooms. In some institutions, like this university college, continued employment can be influenced by the dropout rate from an instructor's class over a period of time in addition to other factors.

Thus, due to funding concerns and hiring practices, student retention can become a numbers game. According to one female instructor,

> Student retention could be used as a political football . . . depending upon how many students actually finish the course work, or how many students go on to the next level . . . even if they don't need the course. . . . Retention . . . from an instructor's point of view, [is] . . . am I able to make it stimulating enough that they will want to come to class and still add to the bank of knowledge, even if they don't have to use it for their career.

Furthermore, one criminology instructor described student retention as ensuring that

> students who enter the program stay through the program so that you have as many students leaving the program successfully and getting a job or . . . as you had brought in.

Aside from examining student retention as a numbers game, administrators and faculty alike noted that other factors must be considered. Both cited examples of how often students have no intention of dropping out; however, external personal pressures influence them to such a degree that some students must put their studies aside, at least for some time. Thus, when considering numbers, administrators must look beyond the fact that a student has dropped out and question the personal motivation as disclosed by an administrator/instructor:

> Student retention, is as much influenced by extraneous factors as much as success. The reasons why students drop out of school has to do with a whole myriad of things . . . some of which are related to their success in their previous studies, but a lot of which are . . . completely independent: finances, home situations, [and] emotional support.

One instructor cited a case of how looking beneath the surface of why students drop out of programs may provide some surprisingly "simple" answers to administrators. For example, a computer program experienced an ever-increasing high drop out rate each year. An investigation of this university college program revealed the following:

> The vast majority [of computer students] who did not continue, who did a year or so and didn't finish, was because of family pressure. It wasn't money; it wasn't a job; it was because the programme was taking too much time from the families.

As a result of the personal stories from the dropouts, the department head implemented significant changes to prevent more students from leaving. According to this instructor, one solution included opening the computer lab more hours to provide increased access for students to suit their schedules and to alleviate overcrowding in the computer lab. This instructor pointed out that when the program head received the findings from

> the student feedback, . . . he was excited about the possibilities of the adjustments they could make, and naturally gratified that it wasn't because of poor instruction or anything like that, and it wasn't money either.

This self-examination by a department to ensure student retention illustrates one example within the university college of a concerted effort made by administrators, faculty, and students to retain students by providing access to services promised within a program. Moreover, this instructor's story points out that "students will tend to stay in school if they see light at the end of the tunnel, if they feel like they're accomplishing something, and getting somewhere." Additionally, this case highlights why many faculty and support staff enjoy working at the university college: "The administration, faculty , and staff are very firm in the attitude that the students' needs come first, and it's our job to figure out what the students need and provide it. That's what make this place a great place to work."

Some instructors and "success" support staff reiterated the concern for students' needs'; however, they added a dimension to retention by comparing the university college to a business and the students to consumers. The instructor contended that "the university college in business terms is customer driven, and. . .that's the only way a university can really meet the need of students in the long run." In his interview, the support staff person explained his view of the institution as a business in this way:

> The whole idea of consumers . . . is starting to filter down into the public education systems. Basically first year students . . . are consumers of an educational product, and the product better be good because the fees are increasing and students are needing this education so that they can go out into the workforce. . . . The consumer demand is really good because it's making all of us examine how we deliver the educational programs and strategies . . . and reminding us that we have a real obligation to students and that we are a big part of them being successful, and we better deliver on that.

Faculty and administrators agreed external factors influence some students to drop out; however, they pointed out that other factors such as unemployment and the economy motivate students to remain in a post-secondary institution to "wait out" the economy in hopes of better times. Thus, according to one faculty member, this facet of retention must be considered when highlighting external factors:

> The student will stay in class longer in 1994 because there aren't any jobs out there, and we cannot pride ourselves on the fact that our students are staying in our classes because of the marvelous job we're doing. It's just pure economics.

Similar to the concept of student success, student retention also implies many underlying layers of meaning.

Relationship between Students and Faculty

In addition to factors external to the institution, interviewees agreed that internal issues influence student retention. Faculty ascertained the issue that causes most concern for them is their relationship with students. Many feel a bit nervous as more and more students voice concerns and complaints either to other faculty or administrators without discussing issues first with the instructor in question. Many faculty worry about maintaining mentoring relationships with students without compromising standards or inflating grades. One criminology instructor commented:

> Retention . . . is being able to hold students through a semester, being able to keep . . . them without compromising standards to move them [through the program].

Moreover, most instructors are genuinely concerned about their relationship with students in this university college where teaching excellence is a major tenet of the institution. Many see their role as assisting and guiding students throughout their academic journeys by looking at the student as a person with a life outside the institution. One humanities instructor asserted:

> I'd be very disappointed if I have a high dropout rate. To me, retention is very important. Student retention is making sure that people don't lose a course for reasons related to you and your presentation and the expectations of the course. If they leave because it wasn't their goal, [or] . . . what they thought it was going to be, . . . [or] . . . personal circumstances come up. . .you wouldn't feel bad about it. I think that ability to keep the students going in a course, not give them an easy reason to say goodbye, that's what student retention is. It's paying attention to can I keep them going, rather than just saying, "Well, sorry, here are the requirements."

An instructor from the student success committee maintained that flexibility in course requirements and tasks was a key element in the manner of teaching and addressing student needs.

> [It]. . . seems to me to be more important to adjust the type of task and the deadline on it. . ., to say, "Ok, so you're under a heck of a lot of stress recently, and your kid broke its leg and it's been in hospital, and you couldn't get anything done, fine [because] . . . you're not going to produce anything that remotely resembles good reasoning when you're under too much stress . . ."[So for the student to meet the] objectives for the course . . . I need flexibility.

In addition to flexibility, other instructors discussed retention in terms of their making the course content relevant and fun:

> Some students literally do go to a class not just because of the material, but because they enjoy the classroom environment. It may be a combination of their fellow classmates and the instructor, it may be just the instructor, it may be just the classmates, whatever chemistry that has the students stay in class besides the academic: "I have to have my math, or I have to have my English."

> Retention . . . is that they want to go to class, that they enjoy the material, they feel support systems, and they don't feel threatened. And I'm sure that if there is a support system where they could feel very comfortable, more students may want to continue despite . . . [the material being dry].

Thus, some instructors attempt to establish more contact with students in order to get to know them beyond the classroom, for most university college instructors are well aware that students put up facades on themselves as people. One criminology instructor makes it a point to socialize with students in the cafeteria or chat with them in the hall:

> I think that one of the things that I do is I make myself available, and I socialize with the students too. I'll go for a beer or that kind of stuff. I do talk to them and encourage them to come and talk to me about graduate school. I help them in resumes, . . . letters of recommendation, and . . . the whole process. . . . I think my student success is informal. . . . I think being available and helpful is another way of doing [success], probably the better way.

To further complement the relationship between faculty as well as administrators and support staff, many at the university college felt a mentoring program should be initiated to enhance student retention and success. Mentoring would provide "one vehicle" to help students focus. One administrator/instructor described establishing departments where students would feel at home by providing mentoring in that context:

> One of the important functions of community colleges. . .is that students use the first year community college experience . . . like a sorting ground. And some of them find, . . ." No thanks, this really isn't for me." And that's a legitimate thing to find.

Due to their belief in the importance of mentoring, this university college's student success committee initiated a pilot mentoring program in September 1994 for first year general arts students. According to a college counsellor, "What is required is a sympathetic ear, and a knowledge of how the system works and of typical experiences of first year students." Eleven mentors, including staff, faculty, and an administrator provided support for 37 "mentees." Mentoring was such a success that when resources become available, the university college will institute an ongoing program. This is only one of the continuing initiatives that faculty and staff are constantly seeking to implement to enhance the experience of their students. The next section highlights further "programming for student success."

III. The "Personal Touch" and Student Success "Programming"

As previously mentioned the university college has a myriad of formal programs available to students for imparting knowledge and skills on how to navigate and survive the post-secondary experience. Moreover, based on the advice and initiative of faculty more informal avenues to support students in their academic endeavours have emerged throughout the university college. These particular services include writing and math centres. In conjunction with administrators, faculty, and support staff and based on student feedback, institutional personnel have sought ways to make computer labs, library, counselling services, and financial aid more user friendly for students. Perhaps, even more important than the services offered is what occurs beneath the surface through the friendly contact with personnel when students access these resources.

For example, faculty explained that during many of the formal "success" courses, they identify the needs and concerns of students, particularly those at risk. Through these courses, instructors pointed out that they assist students to form questions and access internal services that will help students learn to be "successful" criminology, business, or human services students. Within programs such as criminology, "people who are students at risk as they are coming in for the first semester, and once they finish Crim 129, they tend to do better because there is some skill imparting" within the course. One criminology instructor indicated that he covers a variety of topics in Criminology 129, such as

> the purpose of education, . . . job opportunities in the criminal justice community, . . . job satisfaction, personal satisfaction, income, and [reasons] why [students] should be willing to stick out . . . [the educational experience], . . . how much work a student does during the week . . . how to write . . . different styles of examinations, how to do different types of reports, how to do basic kinds research, and . . . how to write resumes.

According to one faculty member, part of the purpose of the formal courses is to "get contact with the students and get the students comfortable with us." Administrators, like instructors, believe that a positive relationship between students and faculty is extremely important. It assists faculty in communicating with students to find out why they may be having problems within the programs as evinced by this statement from an administrator:

> Some departments . . . [have] . . . a really good structure within which students and faculty talk to one another. . . . If there are some indications that a student isn't doing as well as he or she might, then there's a mechanism for talking to that student and trying to identify and solve some of the problems.

Many faculty and administrators consider communication essential for the well-being of the university college students. Unlike faculty and administrators from some institutions, they are not interested in the “weeding out” process, but in supporting individuals to reach their goals and potentials.

Another example illustrates the "personal touch" in a different way. Sometimes students regard librarians as intimidating tyrants within the domain of the library. To overcome this image, librarians at this university college

> are trying to stress in [teaching] labs . . . [for students] . . . to come and ask us questions. They have to be willing to take that risk and that we're not going to penalize them for it. . . . That's our job and part of our mandate to serve them.

Furthermore, one librarian indicated that "We do a lot of one-on-one instruction," where librarians assist students in unravelling the mysteries of research with computers. By providing a more personal approach to illustrate the research process, librarians expect students will become "independent in finding out their own information" and become effective and successful researchers. To ensure that they continually teach students new strategies, the librarian interviewed during the project explained that his department had held a number of meetings to develop new strategies to emphasize working with students individually throughout the term.

"Providing a Home"

In addition to success courses and the personalized touch, faculty and particularly administrators believe it is essential for students to "have a home" within a department. Many administrators explained how, even at the college level, students drift during first year as they have no sense of identification or feeling of belonging with a department or specialty area. According to one administrator, this drifting, although probably an integral part of first year, could be diminished through the creation of departments, specialty areas, or "homes." Within these homes, students could develop consistent and long-term relationships with a number of faculty within a specialty area:

> The chances of student success, statistically, are much higher than in those areas, . . . for example, might pertain in our academic studies area, where the students simply pick out whatever courses they want to go to, and they see their faculty members one by one. But there's no programme that ties the whole thing together very coherently . . . right now.

From the position of administrators within the study, they see

> that [having] . . . a kind of a foothold, a base, within the institution . . . is . . . the single biggest . . . factor . . . to determine student success or less than success.

Another administrator indicated that this "home" or "foothold" approach has other positive consequences. For example, specialty areas or departments have spin-off effects such as clubs, group activities, and a cohesive support network for students. Additionally, association with a specialty area could eventually help students focus regarding their futures. According to one administrator/instructor,

> What's missing . . . at the moment, is the process for assisting the students who may present themselves to us with [an] . . . unclear direction as to what they want to do, and they want to use the first year experience as a means of starting to sort some of those questions. . . .The more successful ones will do that. The less successful ones

> will drift on. . .[often for several years] still not sure where they're going. And . . . we see them around, collecting credits, doing things, but they're not really focused yet.

Thus, by trying to create "homes" for students, they would develop an identity. This administrator continued his description of current programs working in this manner:

> A good illustration . . . [is the] business programme. Students see themselves as part of the business programme, or the criminal justice programme, and clubs are starting to develop around that, and activities, and they begin to have support networks, and study groups are emerging out of a couple of areas in science. For example, study groups are being established, and they work in teams. Now all of those will really enhance the success of the students.

Generally, administrators felt students needed to be situated within an area to provide cohesion, support, and identity.

Socialization: A Sense of Belonging

Administrators and faculty iterate that through the creation of "homes" and a sense of identification for students, more opportunities arise for informal socializing and one-on-one contact with instructors and peers. Furthermore, criminology faculty described informal departmental events that create more personal contact with faculty and outside individuals from the field of criminal justice. As explained by one criminology instructor, the events are like job fairs:

> Efforts are made to bring in the people who do the hiring for Matsqui Police, for Correctional Services of Canada, Customs and Immigration Canada . . . keep . . . [students] abreast of requirements, numbers they'll be hiring, [and] giving them some idea of what the job might entail.

Although the events are informal networking sessions, criminology instructors encourage students

> to take off their baseball caps and dress smartly and introduce themselves and find out what the opportunities are - start maybe making some contacts. This field is much tougher to get employed in than it was a few years ago. Government cutbacks dramatically effect it, so that the need to give people an edge is much more pronounced than five years ago, ten years ago. It's not uncommon to have 1000 people applying for five positions.

In addition to the job fairs "giving students an edge in the job market," faculty also use other informal avenues to create support and cohesion for students within the department. Instructors described cookouts, retreats, and social events that become integral components in creating a criminology student and faculty culture. Much of the interaction is also fostered on a personal basis with students by faculty. Another criminology instructor pointed out that the feeling of belonging through socializing is extremely important to him and is developed on a one-to-one basis:

> I can give people research skills, I can give people skills on how to do a lit review, but I can't ensure that they're gonna be motivated to do it. The only way that I can do it is to do it interpersonally, to be available to them when they need it, see them in the hallway and talk to them. . . those kinds of things. So I think student success . . . is an interpersonal thing.

Moreover, faculty in this department felt that they must act as an integrated, complementary, and hard-working team to ensure students feel a sense of belonging, for different faculty appeal to different types of students:

> There are some instructors that are dynamo, charismatic lecturers. They can do it that way. So I think you gotta . . . develop a team. There's no magic potion here. So . . . student success isn't this magic thing that you can get in a course. It's [an interpersonal] growth process [along with faculty and peers].

Thus, according to personnel interviewed at this university college, student success and programming for success entail many components: the formal and informal, personal contact and a feeling of home and sense of identity. It is an extremely complicated process with no one component more important than another - it is an integrated process and a dynamic and interactive relationship between student, institution, faculty, administrators, support staff, and external sources.

IV. Institutional Evaluation

Previously, at the college, institutional measurement and evaluation were collected informally. However, with the transition to a university college, a department of institutional research has been established. Currently, an institutional "life cycle" of students is being used to track students from their initial registration to graduation and beyond. The university college hopes to compile its own data base on retention and success of students and how the university college relates meaningfully to their lives and careers. Until just recently, one administrator stated that statistical measurement was not the norm; however, with the new office of institutional research, more statistical data and information are available daily.

Although statistical measurement has not been widespread, one administrator noted that he does

> receive each semester an indication of students whose GPA falls below 2.0. . .[for] some programmes . . . that does in fact . . . have an impact on [student] registration for [the] future . . . [for other] programmes . . . that triggers a letter out to the student giving them some cautionary warning about their continuance in the programme. That's not uniform across the whole institution yet, but . . . those kinds of things are beginning to occur.

Furthermore, for at least the past year, formal retention rates within programs, classes, courses, and between identical sections and campuses have been circulated to programs, departments, administrators, and to faculty. This causes reactions in two ways. First of all, institutions are becoming more conscious about retention because of its effect on competing for scarce FTE funding. One criminology instructor maintained:

> More and more programs have . . . to justify themselves. It's just accepted reality coming down the pike, but some programs that do not graduate a great deal of students or can't document significant demand for their services might have difficulty staying in existence. So I think the heat is certainly on in terms of documenting student movement, retention, success, actually going out and working with . . . their chosen field.

Since retention statistics are also now kept on individual faculty and their course sections, other issues arise. First of all, consistency across courses and sections as well as consistency between courses in dissimilar areas are tracked. According to one instructor,

> Without grade uniformity without every instructor marking similarly, giving the same amount, having the same amount of workload, the same level of demand associated with assignments, you do get different grading patterns. . . . If somebody is struggling, they're more likely to drop a course; they're not doing as well in as one they are doing well in. So it doesn't have to be deliberate, but a lot of things other than the merits of a particular course can determine whether or not that's one that students stick with.

Second, personal concerns could arise for instructors based on continued statistical observation of their classroom retention rates:

> I wouldn't want to be in a position where I thought that my reputation or standing, evaluation was somehow contingent on having fewer dropouts than I've had in the past. I think it's very easy to keep every student in your course class. I don't know how much they're getting out of your course, but we can all make sure our students have a lot of fun and enjoy the class and do very well, but whether or not we're compromising what we're trying to do is another issue.

Faculty felt this over-emphasis on retention could also cause grade inflation. If this were the case, then the university college's ranking with institutions regarding standards and quality of student performance would not be comparable. Although statistics are important to document retention, too much credence in them could cause other problems.

V. Other Influential Trends

Tuition

A number of trends tend to affect access, enrollment, and retention in post-secondary institutions. The one that causes the most concern for students and for some university college personnel is rising tuition costs. Although cost may not be a factor for some students, institutional personnel noted that increasing tuition often inhibits attendance for women and those individuals from lower socio-economic spheres. Moreover, faculty pointed out that escalating tuition leaves people overburdened and stressed during their academic experience. One instructor from the student success committee made these observations:

> Rising tuition fees will limit the number of courses that students will take . . . , and . . . it causes frustration. . . . We're just going to limit post-secondary access to education. The students will want to come back only because they feel they need the education to change jobs. They may not be able to come back, and so, therefore, you get someone who's not able to make any changes, they'll be frustrated, they'll feel victimized, by the time we get them as students they'll be hard to teach because they'll be at the end of their rope.

Furthermore, rising tuition has unforeseen spin-off effects on student well-being, retention, and success, for "Rising tuition rates hurt . . . retention, hurt success."

Unemployment

Moreover, many interviewees noted that the restructuring of the economy is creating high unemployment. However, the tight economy is forcing individuals to re-educate and seek alternatives they may not have been encouraged to try when "times were good." Thus, according to some participants, high unemployment and economic "hard times" have a variety of consequences:

> [First,] I think in an odd kind of way . . . because the unemployment rate is so high . . . and . . . the economy is changing its structure, the whole economy is moving from a resource based economy to an information high-end tech . . . economy. People are recognizing, again in their guts, that retraining is not a luxury, it's not . . . [for] more money, it's quite often . . . a survival technique. The same pressures that are mitigating . . . in some ways are forcing people back into school. They're beginning to realize that they have to [retrain].

Second, institutionally, this administrator pointed out that demand for seats and courses is increasing yearly although

> We've managed to increase the number of spaces in this place by 220 full time equivalent places last year, and another 350 or so this year, and the same again next year. . . . Nevertheless we're still turning away more students than we used to turn away before we started this expansion. Now some of that's got to do with the fact that we're . . . offering. . .the degree programmes, but that same thing is happening even to the colleges where they've only got the two-year programmes.

Increased demand for post-secondary education is fueled by unemployment, the economy, and the growing need to retrain.

University Colleges

Another effect on post-secondary access is the emergence of the university colleges. For the most part, administrators, faculty, and staff were very supportive as these new institutions will not only provide more access for students, but they will allow people to complete degrees closer to home as well as explore a variety of programs.

> The emergence of the university colleges . . . is a tremendous help because . . . it is presenting more [real] options for [students] . . . , and they don't have to travel 60 miles to get them. But more, I think it's because it's all here in one place. This notion that you go to college for two years and then you go on somewhere else, you know not yet where, you know not quite for what. But once you've got it all in one place then it's . . . like ah-ha, I can see my goal, my destination is there.

Finally, others see university colleges as providing unanticipated alternatives for students in terms of unique degrees. According to one administrator, instead of following the traditional path of a four-year degree and then going on for two years of technical training due to high unemployment and lack of technical skills, students may be faced with new alternatives. The university college at this site is attempting to combine a bachelor of art's degree and a technical degree into one:

> The university college might be in a unique kind of role to fulfill some of the emerging needs that weren't there five, ten years ago. [For example], 87% of people that get undergraduate degrees never go on to graduate school. . . . [Today] . . . individual resources are very limited, and it's increasingly difficult for people to take time out of their lives to do full time studies. . . . An alternative might be . . . a single four year degree, . . . a marriage of education and training which will. . .do the same thing that people are now having to take six years to do. . . . In putting our degrees together in the university college,. . .particularly on the career side. . .there's been a real . . . philosophical effort, to marry education and training within each one of those degree programmes. And it's the reverse of what you'd normally find in a university, where you do two general years followed by two more specialized years.

Thus, although employment is high and tuition is escalating in universities, opportunities and alternatives may emerge that we never imagined. The university colleges, especially, see themselves as playing a role in that "new tomorrow."

Conclusion

In conclusion, student success and student retention are affected by a variety of institutional, economic, personal, and societal factors. Some are beyond the control of students; however, faculty, administrators, support staff, and others can play an integral role by remaining ever vigilant of economic and institutional and personal factors that influence students through a successful, rocky, or incomplete educational journey in our forthcoming technological and ever-changing world. This institution's teaching focus and concern for the well-being and success of all students entering the university college setting have been reflected throughout the discussions with faculty, administrators, and support staff. These individuals see their role as assisting students in becoming self-fulfilled and self-directed agents in their future endeavours within the university college, the community, society, and the "new tomorrow."

5. MAPPING REALITIES AT A UNIVERSITY

In this section, findings of the action research project at the university site are presented. This section provides a contextual overview of the sample, descriptions of students' experiences, and perceptions of resources available to them. Themes emerging from student focus group meetings include the academic experience, campus experience outside the classroom, educational choices and future life chances.

The University

The university site in this study is one of the largest universities in Canada. Undergraduate enrolments in 1993-94 were projected to be just under 26,000 students. According to the brochure entitled *Information For Prospective Students*, "the University's motto . . . reflects the wealth of opportunities available to students." Teaching and research facilities at this institution are described as "first rate." The mission of the university is as follows:

> The [university] shares the responsibility of all universities to preserve and advance knowledge. [The university] provides instruction, research and public service that contributes to the economic, social and cultural progress of people of British Columbia and Canada, is broadly representative of the fields of knowledge and professional specialties, is known and respected internationally and is sensitive to the issues of our common global society. The [university] dedicates itself to serving the people of British Columbia.

There is no specific reference to students in the mission statement of this institution.

Resources to Promote Student Success

A variety of resources are available to students attending this university. The Student Resources Centre provides career and placement services, counselling services, and liaison among secondary schools and colleges with the university. The Student Resources Centre provides free counselling to students. According to the *Student Resources Centre Brochure*, "psychologists and professional counsellors are available to work with you individually to help you address personal, relationship, career or educational concerns." Throughout the year, various workshops are provided by the Counselling Centre and there is a Career Resource Library on campus.

Campus housing is available for both single students and families as is day care. The Awards and Financial Aid Office administers and provides scholarships and other awards to students. The Work Study Program provides financial resources for students in need. A Legal Advice Program is offered by law students and student health and dental care are available on campus. A student operated support service, the Speakeasy Student Support program, offers information and peer counselling. The Women Students' Office provides feminist counselling services and women's safety workshops. The First Nations House of Learning is a supportive environment for First Nations Peoples.

The Sample

To invite participation in this study, researchers visited a first year Sociology class. After describing the action project to the class, 4 females and 1 male volunteered. Four arts majors and one commerce student agreed to join the project. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21.

These students provided the following reasons for participating in the action research project.

> I am having problems and I wanted to find out how others felt and you said that you would try to help us with things and dealing with the pressure.
>
> I'm interested in the experience.
>
> Moved here from Toronto and I am anxious to meet new people.
>
> I haven't really met anyone at [this university], I live off campus and I am having a really hard time meeting anyone and I thought this would be a good place to get to know some other students.

Three central themes emerged from discussions with the university focus group, including the academic experience, the campus experience outside the classroom, and educational choices, life chances, and the future. Each theme is described in the ensuing sections.

I. The Academic Experience

The academic experience emerged as a central theme and primary concern of university students. The section is organized under two main headings: Academic Success in First Year and Faculty Relationships with Students.

A. Academic Achievement in First Year

Under the rubric of achievement in first year, three themes emerged. These included the high school/university transition, failing in first year and the consequences of failing.

The transition from high school to university was portrayed as resulting in more anxiety than students had anticipated. Rules and standards were different than they had experienced previously.

High school / University Transition

One of the most salient concerns of first year university students early in the semester was the change in content, expectations, and grades from high school to university. The students in this group had all been highly successful in high school. The experience of earning low, and in some cases, failing grades within the first six weeks of university, as expressed at a mid-October focus group meeting, was most distressing.

> It just seems like the harder and harder I try, the less good grades I get. Like the only thing I've ever had As in is English and I just keep getting Cs . . . I'm a total English person and in high school As like in the 90%. English literature was my favourite thing. . . . Now that I'm here it sucks, I don't like going to English, and in high school it was like YES, I get to go to English I'm going this is great.
>
> Do you wonder if anybody gets As?

Marked declines in grades experienced shortly after the beginning of first term was traumatic. To date, failing was a foreign concept.

Failing in First Year

The combination of unclear expectations and first experiences with failing left these students bewildered and despondent.

> It's a hard thing, failing, when you've tried really hard. Like it's almost easier to think "I'm not even going to try, because then if I fail it won't reflect on how smart I am or how hard I work."
>
> If I'm going to sacrifice going out with all my friends and then I'm going to fail too?
>
> Yeah. I mean, it's hard to try your hardest and still not to be able to succeed, and I mean it's kind of a hard lesson to learn and a lot of pressure here.

The consequences of failing were poorly understood. The question "If you fail like a course in first year, what do they do about that? What do they say to you?" was raised at the first focus group session. In her role as action researcher, the facilitator explained the difference between failing a course and a failing average. She outlined the various courses of action taken by the university for students with failing averages at the end of first year, including a mandatory year off and academic probation.

Student participants shared comments they had already heard, including the claim that "a lot of the teachers have said, 'We're not going to let anybody fail. . . . if you're having a problem we're going to make sure that we work on it.'" However, rumours about culling a set number of students by grading "on the curve" were raised by the group as a concern.

> I was told that they try and get some people to drop out because there's too many people in first year and they can't have that many people graduate.
>
> They make it hard. . . . Only a certain amount of people can get As and they have to fail a certain amount of people.

Not all group members' experiences of the first six weeks of university were reported as negative. One group member actually experienced higher than expected grades.

> My friend . . . [said] especially first year . . . you probably will fail it anyways, right? So I go and do the test and I come back and I go, I'm hoping for 70%, and I get it back and I got 82% and so like I go into my dorm, I'm like everybody! Get out of your room! I got 82%!

Nor was the pressure to study hard seen as completely negative. The need to develop discipline and good study skills was described as integral to success in ensuing years of study.

> I'm in Arts, like I know it's harder for Science students, but I'm not finding it very hard if I apply myself and if I do study, it's just getting around to study.
>
> But if you don't learn how to study now, . . . second year comes and it's like "Well I'm supposed to do good now? What do I do now?" I think that it's just the first month, though. I think that the more you get integrated into and you get to know everybody really good, I think it's just going to be the weekends are going to be like you're going to party during the night and stuff, but I think during the week it's going to get a lot more calmed down.

The student's choice of the word "integration," both in the sense of social and academic, provides support for Tinto's (1987) model. The key, according to this student, went beyond the necessity of academic and social integration and included a balance between the two.

This group of students had already been inculcated with the notion that the first year experience was unique. The game was to survive. Expecting to thrive was expecting too much.

> First year, like . . . I know not to like expect to do great.

However, one student challenged this view.

> I think that's almost stupid to say . . . "Oh, well I wasn't supposed to do good anyways in my first year, so it's almost all right that I'm not doing well." . . . I know most people don't do well in their first year. But . . . everyone else who's already gone through it . . [says] "Oh, don't expect to do well, just party . . . that's what residence is all about," . . . it's almost like a double standard.

From the first meeting, the facilitator of this group adopted the role of peer mentor and role model. By offering to share her own experiences, she helped the group articulate their own fears and concerns. When she answered the question, "What was your first year average, if you don't mind?" with "70. And then I got 80 second year and then I got 90 third and fourth year . . . my first year was really cruddy too, and I ended up coming out with a 90 average," students were clearly relieved. Then, the facilitator shared her own grade point average history.

> So I mean you're able, if you really put your mind to it you can build yourself up. . . .You've got to start somewhere and get your confidence and feel like you can do it if you try hard enough.

She encouraged each student to be forthright by approaching instructors for assistance, and reminded them that, ultimately, "You're still in control of how you do." She also offered herself as an advocate for the group members.

At the final meeting of this focus group in December, students reached consensus that in relation to achievement "first year's kind of a write off." By the end of the first semester, students were complacent about earning lower grades than they were accustomed to in high school.

> I'm getting like either, I'm getting between C- and a C in English and like I don't even care anymore. And through my whole high school, I'd get angry below B and God, C+ I would have freaked out. But here it's just like "Oh, well."

One student, however, was the exception. She exclaimed, "I'm doing better in English than I did in high school actually! With my OAC (Ontario Academic Credits) like ended up with 74 or something like that."

Overall, students had varying perceptions of the first term of university. Some lowered their expectations to survive. Others were dismayed by the lack of association between efforts to study and resulting low grades. A few did better than they expected. Nonetheless, first term was deemed "a write off."

B. Faculty Relationships with Students

Relationships with faculty, both in and outside the classroom, were equally important to students. In this section, group participants' descriptions of life in the classroom is organized around the following themes: student advisors, rapport with teachers, inconsistency across different sections of the same course, classroom behaviour of instructors, and quality of teaching.

Student Advisors

Each of the five students in this action research focus group had different experiences with student advising. For two students, the encounter was very brief:

> I just got mine [courses] checked and the guy was like "Do you know what you're taking?" I go "Yeah.." "OK." That was it.
>
> Just to get my program requirements.

For another group member, student advising was very positive.

> For me it was the [faculty] advising office. They're really helpful.

Lack of a declared major in first year was identified by group members as a possible impediment to effective student advising.

> A lot of people don't choose their major until third year so you don't get an advisor in your program until third year. But by that time you may have needed somebody before then. It's more difficult to find someone who will help you that isn't in your program or to help you figure out what program you want to go into.

However, students were critical of the orientation program offered by the university. Rumours of "a massive waiting list" prevented one student from pursuing enroling in the program. Another student agreed:

> They have this program for students to go into but then if you really need someone you're not likely to get in for a while and that makes kind of . . . stupid. Maybe in three months my problems may not be as severe as they are now, you know.

Another student praised the type of counselling offered by his particular department.

> I found my counsellors in [specific department] very helpful. They care for you personally. . . . She also takes your situation into consideration. . . . I mean she like made everything possible. She said our aim is to help you to graduate so we would everything we can to help you. I couldn't finish my assignment and my professor was really mean about it. . . . I spoke to my counsellor and I told her I really wasn't eating well so she spoke to him and she made him take my paper. So I managed to pass. If it wasn't for her, I would fail the course and lose that three credits. So I found the counsellors very helpful.

However, students determined that it may be the individual counsellor, not the department, who makes a difference. As one student stated, "I think it depends on the person. Like some of them are very pleasant and they're very helpful, so I happened to have a very helpful one."

Rapport with Teachers

Problematic relationships with teachers were actually anticipated by group members. As one student stated:

> My biggest fear was like, "I'm going to come here and the teachers are not even going to know me."

However, for all five students, anonymity because of large class sizes was not their experience. As one student stated, "I have a lot of small classes so my teachers know me." By the end of first term, instructors were described as "pretty approachable."

Inconsistency Across Different Sections of the Course

By the end of first term, inconsistency among sections of the same course was a central concern shared by each member of the group. Each student recounted personal accounts of subjective grading, differing expectations, and perceived double standards. Although examples from other courses appeared in the discussion, English 100 emerged as the course exhibiting the most inconsistency across sections.

> Like what exactly constitutes a good grade or a bad grade. Like how can an English teacher say that one essay is good and one essay sucks. That's relatively subjective..
>
> There's a lot of double standards, like I had an English mid-term and I wrote it . . . and when the bell went I finished it, so I'm. . . looking over it and I'm going "Oh god, look at the mistakes," hand it in, well then I got it back and I got a C, I've gotten all Cs. This girl on our floor writes her mid-term and the next class they come in and the teacher hands them all back and says that they can look them over for half an hour, and it's like that's quite a double standard now, isn't it? And . . . if I'd have read it over, if I'd have had time, I would have found all my mistakes, like they were so obvious.

Lack of consistency in the way instructors graded essays was raised as a concern. According to one student:

> For English I know that my friend, . . . she did an essay . . . and got a C-, and this other class, I guess they had to do an essay too, and their teacher just gave them five out of five for just showing up and doing the essay, so when you look at your marks, one person can get an A in English and the other person get like a C-.

The group agreed unanimously that there was little consistency in course content and equally little consensus among teachers' expectations and grading practices. As one student exclaimed, "like if I was in another section, would I be getting an A?"

One particular instructor's expectations were particularly distressing to one student:

> I just had this essay that I had to hand in [in English] and I did a really horrible . . . actually, because our teacher told us that, my teacher personally said . . . that if you get someone to proofread it they are correcting your mistakes, . . . it's really not your paper. Well I had my friend who gets As proof read my paper. Right? And I had it done to perfection I thought . . . argument here and I handed it in but later left me kind of worried like when I get it back what if she should accuse me of plagiarism. So I got in this big huge frantic fuss and me and my boyfriend we went to the library and looked up plagiarism and the definitions in the university on plagiarism and went to Outreach and asked them about it.

Their research led them to conclude, "They can't accuse you of plagiarism unless there is three or more consecutive words in a row . . . .. used by somebody else." Other group members were completely taken aback by the idea that having work proofread would constitute an act of plagiarism. One young woman was under the impression that proofreading each others' work was a legitimate practice. However, when she mentioned it in class, the instructor's reaction was,

> "WHAT!" Right in front of the whole class. . . . "Did you say proofread? Because you can't have anybody proofread your essay. . . . nobody else ever looks at anything till you get it back."

Another student's experience was different.

> My friend . . . [and I were] doing an essay, he's like . . . "Get at least three people to proof read it, I never get less than three people to proofread it." And another guy . . . got an essay back and the prof. wrote on it, "This is a take home essay, you should not have any grammatical errors."

The facilitator offered to follow up this student's concern. At the next meeting, she reported that after speaking to head of the English Department, an official handbook of departmental guidelines and policy existed. In it, the policy on plagiarism is defined.

> He said it's kind of a fine line and it's up to the teacher's discretion as to what she considers appropriate or inappropriate in terms of getting others to proofread. And he said that he doesn't consider having someone read over your essay for you know, outstanding errors sort of that's okay. But he says if someone reads it and sufficiently changes it, that it's not your own work, and that he would agree with her in that sense.

Six weeks into their first term, students were unclear about who set exams and whether exams were common across sections of the same course. Inconsistent teaching practices and expectations led to considerable anxiety about what would be on the examinations.

> For some courses there are common exams. I did some courses in Commerce and . . . like we had a lousy teacher, but we had a common exam and the whole class didn't do well.

> I've never . . . had a common exam with another class, it was always each teacher sets their own exam.

> My teacher told me that she doesn't set [the exam]. She told me that she doesn't make [up the exam]. She said that the department heads [did], she said this bunch of old ladies.

In this instance, the facilitator encouraged group members to clarify with instructors who sets the exam, and to ask questions, such as "Are we going to be expected to know the same as somebody in another course that has a different textbook or a different requirements?"

Classroom Behaviour by Instructors

The inappropriate classroom behaviour by some instructors was raised by two group members. One instructor, teaching in the social sciences, was described as "really sick."

> All he talks about is sex. . . . He tells us stories, like "I was sitting at home watching a porno with my wife . . . " And then he started talking about soap operas . . . I swear [we] had a 20-minute conversation about *The Young and the Restless* . . . And he makes such assumptions like "Oh, yeah, well when you were drunk on Friday night" like if we were all drunk on Friday night and then we all had sex, like he just totally assumes that all the time.

This student was aware of the university's sexual harassment policy.

> I was getting really concerned, I mean all he ever talks about is sex and then when we went to that . . . thing in residence and they were saying about how it's sexual harassment and stuff, like I could say something or write him a note because it kind of did sort of bother me.

Other practices such as arriving 20 minutes late for every class, telling students first day of class that they need not attend every class, and suggesting that anything -- including "order[ing] pizza if you like" -- goes in his class, and delivering lectures consisting solely of "just gives definitions on the board" led this student to conclude "I wanted to really like it but he just ruined it for me." Another student describe the classroom behaviour of a female instructor:

> My teacher hits on guys in our class. . . . She's really young. . . . There's this guy in our class, he's pretty cute and she's like "You look at the sentence," she made it so hard for me, right. And I finally figured it out like 5 minutes later. She didn't help me one bit. Then, "James, do you have number 4?" and she's got this like glow in her eyes . . . And he's like "Hm, hm. And she's like "Oh, let me help you." She writes the whole answer on the board. "Do you understand?"

Despite being aware of sexual harassment policy and being encouraged by the facilitator "if it ruins your class experience you can do something about it," no further recorded discussion about action against either instructor occurred.

Instructors' Credentials, Quality of Teaching, and Evaluation of Teaching

After attending classes and observing instructors, students began to question what credentials university instructors were required to hold. When informed that the usual required credential was a Ph.D., the response was

> First week of school I seriously thought like my high school teachers had more expertise.
>
> I swear my [foreign language] teacher, they just sort of went to [city where the language is spoken] and asked some lady off the street and said, "Come teach." We ask her questions and she's like, "Oh, I'm not sure about that, let me check it." My English teacher, she spells every word she writes on the board wrong. You're my English teacher. We're like trying to correct her spelling and her grammar and she's marking my essays. . . But I thought like my English teacher it's her first year, my [foreign language] teacher it's her first year and you can tell.

When asked by the facilitator whether they felt most of your professors were incompetent, the response was "Yeah," and "That's pretty sad, isn't it." Many specific examples of bad teaching were cited, including:

> My [social science] prof, he doesn't make any notes or anything, he just talks and talks and talks . . . he's the most boring guy I've ever had. I mean he seems totally incompetent.

Others lacked effective teaching skills.

> My [foreign language] teacher she's like she'll be explaining like and you do this and she stares off into space and I'm like, "Who the heck are you talking to?"

Some teaching assistants also demonstrated poor teaching skills.

> My [social science] professor just took off . . . now his TA is teaching and she is really bad. We just can't understand a word of what she is saying. . . . She just takes a piece of paper, she just reads off it . . . . She is inexperienced.

The simple suggestion by the facilitator "Could you ask her for copies of her notes?" elicited the following response from the group participant, "Yes, I think we could. That would probably be a good idea." The attitudes of other teaching assistants presented problems for group members when seeking extra help:

> [My TA is] really like snappy like, "Well, you can come in and talk to me about a specific sentence and how you are having trouble with the structure and I might give you some tips."
>
> [When I asked for help. the T.A.] just keeps on walking. "Come by later." But now I don't even pay attention to him.

In the main, classes were described as boring. "They're all boring. I always fall asleep in them." Group participants also questioned the relevance of social science courses:

> I find all of these -- like anthropology, sociology -- I think they're useless. I mean it doesn't seem to have any relevance, it's like these people they have nothing better to do.
>
> My sociology, like the study of the social whatever, but by the time they come up with an answer of why the world is like this and stuff like, it's already changed.
>
> I read the textbook. . . it seems so stupid, it just seems like why am I reading this, how can this help my life at all by just reading about all these people thought. It seems stupid.

However, if the instructor demonstrated sincerity, then the boring nature of the class was more palatable. One student described another social science instructor:

> I mean he's boring but what he's teaching is pretty dull. I mean as far as profs go, he's sort of like most out there. He's not trying to impress us. He's not trying to be an idiot. And he knows what he's talking about. I feel bad for the guy. I mean he's devoted his life to such a boring class. But he's doing his job, right.

Overall, students were frustrated with the poor quality of teaching they encountered at university. They provided examples of professors and teaching assistants who lacked effective teaching and communication skills.

II. The Campus Experience Outside the Classroom

The campus experience outside the classroom was the second main theme identified by the university focus group. Students discussed several types of services available to them, including financial aid, counselling services, the bookstore computer department, the library, and the registrar's office. Also included in this section is a discussion of racism on campus and life in residence.

Campus Services and Resources

At the first focus group meeting, students identified problems with finances and available financial resources.

> Finances for sure! I may have to drop out because I haven't got my student loan yet. My Mom put my form in late and she doesn't care if I go to school or not and my Dad is a jerk. I am scared to go and talk to the people in financial services because they may tell me that they are not going to give me a loan and then I will have to drop out.

These students were inexperienced with handling financial loans and dealing with large bureaucratic institutions. Thus, dealing with the system was clearly intimidating.

> I have never gone there to talk to them, right. What am I supposed to say? "Hi, I can't make my payment on November 2nd, are you going to lend me $1,000?" What do I say to them? I don't know what I'm supposed to say. The ladies on that desk are so grouchy they're just like "Hahaha! See you later!" Like that's how I feel they would be. Somebody told me I should go talk to the people at the bank, but I don't know how that works. I don't know what to do.

Intervention by the facilitator entailed encouraging those group members with financial trouble to actively seek assistance. As she aptly put it, "I mean, maybe if they're totally unhelpful they're totally unhelpful, but the worst thing that could happen is they could be totally unhelpful. Anything above that is an improvement." The immediate response of one group member was to try the facilitator's approach:

> Well, I'll just go talk to them . . . . [I've] got nothing to lose. . . . If he says, "No, I don't want to talk to you," well gee, I only lose my pride, self-respect.

In addition to financial concerns, at the first focus group meeting two students shared their experiences about how they were treated at the registrar's office.

> The people here [support staff] are very unfriendly and treat people like numbers . . . it was literally like 30 seconds . . . after 4:00 and they close at 4:00 and the lady was just closing all the doors and I said I just had a quick question . . . and she said, "There is no such thing as a quick question," and she started closing the door and I'm like standing there . . . so I just . . . said the question anyway and she just goes, "It's already deducted from your thing" and she slams the door and I'm just going, "Okay, thank you very much."

> I go stand in one line, the awards line, and then I get to the front and . . . "You have to go stand in this other line," . . . so I go to this other line and I get up there . . . and of course as soon as I get up there the computer breaks down and so . . . "Well you have to come back because you don't know how much you owe."

At the second focus group meeting the facilitator alerted students to campus resources by outlining the various types of counselling and student services on campus, including the availability of free counselling, and the Student Resource Centre where old examinations are kept. None of the group participants were aware of any of these services.

Continuing from the previous sessions, group members arrived with new accounts of inconsiderate treatment. One student shared her experience of trying to buy a computer at the campus bookstore:

> I went to go buy [a computer], right, and . . . every time I'd go in there they'd be rude. . . It finally when it came in and they told me that the sale ended . . . and that I might have to pay the original price. . . . So I was like, "Forget it, no way," and I like I was about just to leave, like forget my $200 deposit and leave. . . and they finally said, "Okay, we'll give you the sale price" and I got it. And I hate them. Like even people I've talked to, they say that people there are so rude and I've experienced that.

Despite negative encounters with many campus resources, one service -- the Safewalk program -- related to safety on campus, was mentioned positively in two different group discussions. It was described as "pretty good." Members were also aware of other services such as the Safety buses, but had not used them.

Group participants were not keen on structured library tours. On two occasions the facilitator offered to provide a library tour for the group or instructions in the use of CD Roms. She urged them by saying, "Gees, if I had known all these resources existed when I was going to school, it would have been great. Like the CD Rom." Group participants were not ready for this.

> I did my own library tours. But I don't think I need to use the library. I haven't had to use it yet. I think I'll have to.
>
> The information desk . . . they are really friendly, if you have a question . . . they are really helpful and helped us find it . . . I was very impressed actually.

The library was also seen as a place of refuge from the activities of residence life.

> [When] I can't study [in residence because] there is just too much there to do. . . . I'll just go to the library and sit there and open my book and that is it, I can sit there for two hours with this text book . . .
>
> Plus you see everybody else so you feel like . . .
>
> You start to feel good about yourself, like, "Wow I'm doing work, I can't believe this."

Cultural Concerns/Racism

The issue of racism was raised at the first meeting by an Asian member of the group. This provided an opportunity for the group, comprised of one Asian and four non-Asians to exchange understandings, stereotypical views, and opinions on racism. Considerable discussion ensued about the number of Asian students on the university campus. Students' comments revealed their ignorance of the racial composition on campus:

> Does anybody know how many Asians there are here?
>
> I think it's about one third.
>
> A lot of them . . . are here are from here, like, they have lived here for a long time, like girls on our floor. They are from Burnaby and stuff, they didn't just come.

Self-segregation and competition between Asians and non-Asians were identified as key concerns.

According to accounts provided by focus group members, students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds tended to self-segregate. This often produced confusion about socializing among groups. When asked whether programs such as Ritumekien actually accomplished the goal of bringing cultures together, students' responses were quite negative.

> But how does that bring people together? I feel like they eat in our cafeteria but they don't talk to us. It's not like I go up and talk to them either.
>
> You're comfortable when you are with your friends. I'm from Sweden and I would love it if I met like a Swedish group, just because there is something that bonds you together that's not to say that they don't want to get to know any Canadian's or anything but you already have a tie together and something to talk about.
>
> I think there is a lot of grouping. Everyone together in sort of the in-group/out-group, like all these people must be the same and not really taking each person as an individual.

The relationship among competition for few places, attitudes at university, and campus atmosphere was cast within the context of racial discord.

> I will be totally honest when I think of Chinese and Japanese people. I think of really intelligent people. . . . I feel that I am going to do the worst in the class and they are total brains. . . . People feel a little bit threatened. . . . You have to be in the top 5% or you're not going to go anywhere and if you look at the top 5% it's probably going to be a lot of Asian people.
>
> I remember when I was applying of University, someone said . . . [I'm] really going to have a hard time at UBC because all the Japanese and Chinese people that go there get all the books in the summer and read all the books before classes even start and then once they go to classes they already know everything and you have no way to compete and I came out here feeling like that before I even began and I think that that is sort of an image that is propagated you know like you can't compete.

Overall, however, focus group participants expressed disdain for racism. It was far more important to work together for a common goal.

> I think that there is a lot of feelings of competition and feeling of "us against them" . . . as opposed to everyone banding together and saying . . . "We're all here and we are all going to school and we all have a common goal." I think there's a lot of us against them.

Segregation was also described as extending to residential life. Members of the dominant white group seemed hesitant to invite Asian students to participate in group activities. Much of this was attributed to a poor understanding of other cultures.

> [Most] just stay in their rooms.
>
> Maybe because it's not even in their culture cause it is in ours, like Friday night party night and we go out and. . . for them they have to study . . . that's fine.

Through discussion facilitated in the focus groups, students were able to question their own views and practices. Much of the racist views held were founded largely on ignorance. Open discussions provided the first step toward dispelling stereotypes and challenging assumptions.

Residence Life

Four out of five group members lived in residence their first year. Discussion, commencing from the first meeting, focussed around the experiences of residence living. Ongoing themes included overly strict or overly slack residence advisors, noise, the lack of privacy or others' demands for privacy and quiet, different work/play patterns of roommates, and inconsiderate behaviour by roommates. Students perceived esidence advisors as a resource, as "someone to talk to about my problems kind of thing." Another group participant commented, "When I go and talk to them I don't really think of them as my advisors, it's more of a friend."

Residence life, according to group members, had its advantages and disadvantages, as summarized succinctly by one group member:

> Basically the whole concept that it's just a whole bunch of people crammed together in a building and you're made to be friends, you know. That whole concept.

III. Educational Choices, Life Chances, and the Future

From the first meeting onward, considerable discussion occurred around the theme of the benefits of university participation in relation to the cost and the future. Was, in fact, university participation a good investment in human capital, or would group members have been better off beginning their post-secondary studies at a community college? Why were they here? Students expressed the following sentiments at initial meeting:

> I just came to school because I knew I wanted to go to university but I don't know what to take.
>
> I just, I knew that from high school that I shouldn't take time off because I would just probably procrastinate more. . . but I'm here now and I'm . . . glad I chose to go because it's fun, my classes are fun and it's not that much pressure . . . I am doing fine.

Research on post-secondary participation indicates that some students have always planned to attend university. Long term dispositions are instilled by the family and reinforced in the school system. However, once at university, these student are not really sure how they got there or why they are there (Andres Bellamy, 1992a, 1992b). For students in this study, first term experiences such as earning low caused some students to reconsider whether university was the best choice.

> I'm getting all Cs. Like what a waste of a year. I'm spending $6,000 . . . like I'm paying for this like I didn't get a scholarship or anything. If I'm going to pay $6,000 I could have just stayed at my Mom's house and partied every Friday night you know, and it would cost me a lot less. . . . I always think like I should get As, like I'm paying for this I should be getting good grades.
>
> I was like talking to my brother actually last night . . . "Well, English isn't going too well, I'm not doing very well." And my brother was like, "Are you getting like C or something?" He's like "Ha, ha, ha, I'm getting B+s ." . . and he's just going to a community college in our town and I said to him like "No, that can't be happening."

However, for two of the group members, community college was perceived as a less desirable alternative, a step down.

> My roommate . . . was in Science One and she failed her mid-term and . . . and she was like "Well, I'm going to see how my other mid-terms go, and if they . . . if I don't do too well I just know that college is for me" and I'm like, "No, no, no, don't think about that."
>
> When I look at people who are in college, I think "Oh, they're such losers." . . . I'm going to university, this is awesome, I'm like so smart."
>
> I think if I went to college first and then I had to come and transfer here, I would see that as a waste of time. Like if I come here and just like really study and stuff I can get the marks and get the grades.

Despite these comments, the alternative of community college did hold some appeal.

> It would be better to be the top dog in a little pile than like right at the bottom.
>
> Tuition for Douglas College is about what I paid for books here, right. I mean, what are we doing? Like I could get the same . . . take two years, transfer out or start in my second or third year, depending on what you do. I mean, that saves me $12,000.

By late November of the first term, one group member was seriously considering whether she would return to university the next year.

> I don't know if I'm going to come back to university next year. . . . I don't know for sure . . . I need to take some time off. . . . Right now, if I have the grades I have now, then I've just wasted $6,000.

Even a reminder by the facilitator that first year is the most difficult year and that a university degree provided "a gateway to more" did not ease her concerns:

> I just think . . . what do you do with a B.A.? . . . You can go to college for two years and then come to university which I know is quite what a lot of people do.

Lack of educational and career direction and minimal guidance left this group "disillusioned." The value of an undergraduate degree came under close scrutiny by the group at one late November meeting.

> You're constantly reminded like how really futile it is, our education.
>
> What's the difference. I mean I'm going to get a B.A., probably get a job and four years later . . . I'm not going to get any better salary than they are. Maybe I can start as manager at McDonald's. I'm quite serious. Oh, yeah, I've got a B.A. in English so what can I do, write for *The Province*?
>
> As far as jobs go, unless you go on from a B.A., it's useless basically.

By the final meeting in December, morale had rallied somewhat.

> I'm going to stay here till the end of the year. I won't go to college. I don't want to go to college.
>
> Colleges are for losers. . . . I'm just kidding. It's just that I don't want to go to school where a lot of people who like barely passed Grade 12.

At the final December meeting of the group, the facilitator posed the question, "If you were going to drop out of school, what would be the biggest reason right now?" This question elicited the following responses:

> I want to go back home. . . . I'm just like sick of people on the floor like in residence . . . like I've got good friends on my floor, but they all constantly got problems.
>
> Only. . . if I find it very difficult to cope with my school. I think if I reached the point where I was like doing very badly and I felt like let me just take a year off. But you can always come back.
>
> If I have no idea what I wanted. And I don't think there's any point in like spending all your money if you don't know.

Generally, the university focus group experienced a stressful first term. By December, some were questioning their decisions to attend university, costs at university compared to costs related to college attendance, and the usefulness of earning B.A.s.

Individual vs. Institutional Responsibility for Student Success

After discussing the advantages and disadvantages of different types of post-secondary institutions, students raised the issue of responsibility. This final theme arose during the last meeting of the focus group, and was provoked when the facilitator asked, "Do you . . . think it is every individual's responsibility to pass, or do you think the institution should have some concern?" Responses to this question were mixed. One student asserted, "It's your responsibility." Another disagreed.

> I kind of disagree with that because I think to a certain extent it's your own responsibility but, at the same time, like I think you should maybe have like certain meetings where you have the opportunity maybe to like discuss with your prof what the problem is.

Even in December, and despite regular meetings of the focus group, students indicated that they were still unsure of how to solicit the right combination of assistance from instructors, counsellors and other resources on campus.

> Yes, like they always have office hours, but it's like to what extent do you use those? I mean you know when their office hours . . . I never go [to talk to my profs].
>
> I'm having some problems right know and I just feel like my profs just say, "That's nice, see you later, I'm busy." But I think that's why they have like counselling and all that stuff.

Group members held differing views regarding who should be responsible for an individual student's success.

> I think you shouldn't be spoon-fed because university is the time for you to be like independent and learn how to cope with everyday situations so that when you go out to work . . . I think there should be facilities which we can go to if we need help, but you shouldn't be spoon-fed at all.
>
> It's up to you to use the resources as well to find out what's there as well. Everything when you come in to a university . . . like it's up to you. Like in high school if your grade starts to slack, your teacher will say "Don't you want to go see someone, blah, blah, this, this, and this is available." If you start failing here, I don't see like how they really care. . . . Basically, you got to figure out.

However, acting on available services was one issue. The actual accessibility of resources that were in high demand, short supply, or both, was another issue.

> I don't think it's appropriate that you have a three-month waiting list [for counselling] if you do have a problem.
>
> I know that they don't have enough counsellors for how many people who want to go talk to someone. You can go in for your initial appointment but then they say "Oh, well, no one can see you for a month" and it's kind of like.

Conclusion

The two interpretations of the motto of the university, "It's yours" or "It's up to you", permeated focus group discussions over the. Although services were available, students described how they deciphered how to use and access them. The transition from high school to first year university life was stressful and frustrating. Moreover, many students indicated they were required to lower their expectations somewhat to survive. However, this was not the case for all students, for some were actually able to negotiate the system more effectively than they had anticipated. Impinging on their experiences were behaviours by and relationship to instructors, finances, racism, and life in residence. Costs related to university attendance became particularly worrisome when students considered the marketability of a B.A. in the workforce. Although students appeared to be disillusioned, they showed resilience and maturation in their efforts to survive the first term at this large institution.

6. PERSONNEL INTERVIEWS AT A UNIVERSITY

Background

To further explore the first year experience and how it matches or corroborates institutional, administrative, and faculty perceptions of students' experiences, personnel from the university were interviewed. These individuals had been involved in some form of student success "program," including mentoring, counselling, initiating workshops, streamlining services, and administering programs and resources. Thus, they had had contact with first year students in one context or another.

Sample

Five males and three females participated in separate one hour long semi-structured audio-taped interviews during November, December, and January after the student focus groups had been completed. Three instructors, three administrators, and two administrator-liaison personnel were chosen from sociology, counselling, student services, the women's centre, and the liaison office resulting from their contact with and understanding of first year students. In these interviews, definitions of student success and retention, student success programs, measurement of student success, institutional research, and trends in higher education, such as rising tuition, high unemployment, burgeoning enrolments, emergence of the university colleges, and the University of Northern British Columbia were discussed. The semi-structured nature of the interview format permitted researchers to include questions written on specific issues arising from the students in the focus groups.

Six themes from the perspective of university personnel emerged: perceptions of success and retention, sense of community experience, success programs and services, evaluation, and university access.

I. Perceptions of Success and Retention

To set the context for understanding the relationship among institutional personnel, success "programs," and first year students, the researcher asked each interviewee to define "student success." By virtue of their positions within the institution or involvement in student success "programs," participants demonstrated concern for the students' experiences and successes inside and outside the institution. From their responses, interviewees illustrated they had thought about the concept of student success, which so recently had become an institutional buzz word across Canada.

Although concerned with student success, some administrators and faculty thought the term discounted the university's mission as an educational institution and the faculty's intentions as teachers. Moreover, they believe student success goes hand-in-hand with the mission of an educational institution.

> Everybody at the university is concerned with trying to teach students and that . . . is the essence of what student success should be all about. Student success is . . . not something special that colleges and universities do, it's the very essence of what colleges and universities do.

Ultimately, many discussed student success as tied to academic performance. They pointed out that success, especially for students, is still intimately tied to grades. One interviewee noted, "Students still interpret their grades as a reflection of how they're doing in the institution." However, for some students, success is more closely associated with academic performance than for others. As one administrator indicated,

> I think . . . [success] depends on the student. I think there are a group of students for whom achievement is the driving force . . . often at the expense of what else goes on in life, especially around a university.

For other students academic performance is influenced by such external factors as family.

> There are some students for whom scholastic achievement is really important. Their parents expect it. They've always been expected to come to university and for those students anything short of an A can be seen as a failure.

According to many of the individuals interviewed, students' concern for successful academic attainment at the undergraduate level is also motivated by future employment opportunities.

> It's all tied into the fact that the job market has become so much more difficult that many more people are here who wouldn't have been here ten or fifteen years ago.

Interviewees noted that the institution and its personnel need to reevaluate students not in terms of weeding out students as was done in the past, but in understanding the high calibre of those students admitted to the university. Like others, this institution requires increasingly high GPAs for admission. Thus, students at the university need to be perceived differently -- they are already successful and do **not** need to be "weeded out" of the institution. As mentioned by one administrator,

> I think with very few exceptions . . . we have really excellent students, and . . . we should work on the assumption that they're all quite capable of completing the program. There's not a lot of dummies in there who need to be weeded out through vigorously applied . . . tough regulations.

Administrators and instructors alike concurred:

> It's not like we're taking in people that we think just barely have the chance for success in our programs. The cut-off for admission is well above the minimum for university. . . . I do think that students are investing so much in their education that we have some obligation to try and help them if they're getting into difficulties.

If students have difficulties adjusting to first year, this should not be misunderstood as students being dumb, lazy, or incapable; their "troubles" should be interpreted in context of adjusting to a very large and often alienating university.

> The truth is . . . right now it is so tough to get in here that if you've got a student in first year Arts or first year Science or first year Engineering who isn't doing very well at Christmas, they're [still] a bright student.

Due to the changing quality and capabilities of students today, participants felt that students should be treated differently and with more of a "helping hand" type attitude instead of punitively by trying to weed out students if they did not perform well in first year. According to one administrator, "there is an element in there that we're a little bit kind of punitive with our regulations and that was appropriate ten or fifteen years ago" but now this is no longer necessary or desirable. Furthermore, through the discussions, individuals reiterated that the notion of student success is influenced by time and place and is extremely subjective. For example,

> We recognize that failure to meet our standards is a somewhat arbitrary assessment of a person's overall ability, and our standards . . . are high . . . primarily because we have the luxury of being able to admit currently . . . a very bright group of students. So that pushes the standards up. We don't have to do anything. They're just so good that the standards go up and the bottom five or six percent are still pretty good students.

Thus, criteria are arbitrary; therefore, student success should be evaluated in context rather than in isolation. According to the site participants, another way of defining student success is in terms of program or course completion, implying institutional and classroom retention or "head count." As one administrator stated,

> The working definition that I would use [of student success] is students who complete the program that they wanted to complete when they entered . . . the data can be somewhat misleading because . . . students leave, not because of lack of success but as part of a plan that was developed before they entered the institution. . . . It's quite unfair to assume that that . . . apparently low completion rate represented failure either by the institution or by the students involved.

Although participants described student success' composition as including the mission of the institution, grades and academic performance, type of student, and completion of courses, some maintained the crux of the definition was student agency or empowerment.

Empowerment and agency begin with the student exploring the educational event and connecting it to his or her life experiences. According to one administrator,

> Ideally [what] I would see students . . . doing in a university [is] coming in to . . . explore where they want to go [with us] helping them to develop in lots of different ways--both academically and personally. . . . It's almost a process of learning how to ask questions rather than a process of coming to the university and being fed information. . . . Student success is figuring out what questions to ask.

Through exploration, a process of development occurs for students. Many institutional personnel see their roles as aiding and abetting the developmental process for student success. One administrator observed:

> I take a broader view of a student than just an academic success, so when I think about success . . . I think of more of a student development approach. So I'm looking at the whole person: the social side, the emotional side, the health side, the academic side, the spiritual side . . . the career/occupational side. . . . So when I think of students I think of assisting them in their occupation of being a student.

This source reiterated that through the developmental process, empowerment results:

> I'm trying to empower them. Moving from a sense of being a pawn in their life to being an agent [so they can] address whatever . . . specific barrier they might bring into a centre like this or . . . to enhance the skills they have in being an agent.

Furthermore, empowerment and agency are transferable from educational experiences to life events. Students begin to relate to their communities and world the differently. This administrator commented:

> I believe agency is transferable. . . . Agency can be taught in a context, but once one develops the skills of agency and has an outlook of an agent . . . they're going to be able to survive not only that particular issue, but transfer that in other areas of life. . . . That's what student success and student retention mean. . . . It's a process, it's interactive, and our role is to facilitate them becoming agents in their life.

In addition, participants discussed student success in terms of students deriving long-lasting meaning from the educational experience influenced by the world of the 1990s. They iterated that the meaning would have an impact on students' lifelong learning process.

> I think there are . . . students who see their . . . years at university are learning years in which some of the learning goes on in the classroom, and some of it goes on by what's around them.

Additionally, as observed by one woman, participants considered student success as a long process establishing meaning between education and the individual's personal life experiences, both philosophically, politically, and socially.

> One thing that students learn in first year is probably how enormous that process is, and what a huge task is going to be before them in terms of getting a degree that . . . is meaningful and getting an education that balances . . . [with] their own lives personally, but also [has] some utility to it as well. . . . Also it's a process where they're growing as social individuals and as political individuals, and I don't even think that first year really scratches the surface on a lot of that.

Finally, as one man pointed out, student success for individuals may, in fact, be choosing between education and other alternatives.

> When you talk about success, if someone. . . came to university in a sense because they couldn't think of anything else to do and as a result . . . they decided that they really didn't want to be here, they would much rather be a writer or whatever and they went away and did that, is that success or not?

Participants maintained that choosing alternatives to education should not be considered a failure, for sometimes an apparent failure based on academic marks can turn into a success outside the educational institution. For example,

> There will be those who fail. But . . . if the student realizes that this is not for them and goes on to be a success in something else, did they really fail? Well, not really. . . . It just means [the student] didn't want to continue.

As voiced by the university administrators and professors alike, the concept of student success is complicated to define. It covers the institutional mission, course related skills, academic performance, student profile, course and program completion, and personal agency and empowerment. Student success is not just relegated to the student, but it is a holistic process including the institution, its programs, faculty, behind the scenes people such as administrators, support services, outside sources such as family, peers, world events, economic trends, and exercising choice. Thus, when thinking of student success, individuals must include all those who come into contact or play a role in students' lives.

II. A Collaborative Endeavour

Student success as well as student retention are extremely complex and interwoven concepts. They are also closely linked with allocation of resources and treating students as proactive people who may need some support navigating an impersonal and large bureaucracy. Although outwardly impersonal, many individuals exist within the institution who wish to make the experience a personally satisfying and humanizing journey. It is not surprising then that all those interviewed commented on the importance of personal interaction between institutional personnel and students. However, despite their willingness to help, support, and find material for students, for example, faculty often felt frustrated in their attempts because,

> By and large, the communication between the high school liaison office here, student counselling office here, the student resources office here, the financial services office here and individual members of faculty is virtually nonexistent.

Furthermore, some interviewees asserted that the university needs to take more responsibility for tracking student retention as well as portraying a less impersonal, onerous, and uncaring attitude. One individual asked:

> To what extent is it the responsibility of the system? Or it's the failure of the system to cope in some way with those students, that x percent who drop out.

Some faculty and administrators believe that the university must become more supportive of students in their first year. For example,

> I think if we can make it easier for students to see that if they don't necessarily do well academically in first year, that's not the end of the world and it certainly isn't the end of their degree and that they're really only beginning to scratch the surface of what that learning process is all about, I think that would increase retention a lot more than a lot of . . . maybe more solidly academic responses.

Furthermore, the institution could track students' success and retention and encourage students by congratulating them on successfully completing their first semester. This would also provide more contact among students and faculty. One administrator maintained, “they should take a look at their first year students . . . at Christmas” identify any problems and send appropriate letters of encouragement, congratulations or suggestions for help. Some participants felt that the university overemphasized academic excellence at the expense of the student as a human submerged in a new experience.

> I think what the university does do . . . is emphasiz[e] academic excellence over everything else. It communicates to students that if you can't cut it, get out.

Interviewees continually reiterated that the university should look at the relationship between the educational and personal experience -- not just the academic event. By looking at the experience holistically, the institution is more likely to retain students than have them seek alternative institutions where they will receive a more humanistic approach than one where they feel like an isolated number. According to one administrative support personnel,

> If we don't have a balance between . . . the academic side and the student services side, then we're not going to have students to teach, because students are going to go elsewhere, and particularly they're going to go to colleges or . . . to smaller universities because they don't feel so alienated.

Rather than have students feel they were “just . . . processed little cattle” or "counted like beans", many felt efforts should be created “to help students feel that [the institution] is a friendly, welcoming place.” One administrator discussed a letter writing method employed to achieve this end:

> Three years ago I began the process of writing a letter to all incoming freshmen saying, "Welcome to [the institution]," from me and saying it's a great place, lots of resources, and outlining in part what our services can do for them to enhance their chances here at [this institution] for success.

Mentor and buddy programs were also identified as useful means of personalizing the otherwise alienating experience at the institution.

> [Mentor programs] . . . improved the students' perception of the value of their experience at university, so on that basis I think we should do more of it.
>
> The students themselves should have a role in this . . . welcome[ing] incoming students and tell[ing] them what the real stuff is. I don't think that really happens in the system adequately, although some departments I think are much better than others at trying to set something of that kind up.

Although mentor and buddy programs were felt to be needed and useful, one faculty member thought there had not been "as many resources [devoted] to [the programs] as they might have liked." While some felt the program useful, others' experience with mentor programs had shown that they were not always successful.

> I was kind of surprised at how difficult it was, how artificial it seemed to . . . create this thing called a mentor group, and [we had to] dream up things for it to do. It just didn't have an obvious raison d'être. . . . It was a complete farce. [Students] . . . didn't seem to really know what it might be about or have any sense that it was really very useful, so it kind of evaporated.

One liaison administrator suggested that first year students should first reach a minimum level of awareness for such programs to be successful. She discussed her attempts at promoting a mentoring program with first year students in this way:

> I've tried to run a mentoring program. Now for third and fourth year women students that's been really successful, but when we tried to expand that to include first year students it wasn't.

Other faculty members thought such programs would be successful if student and faculty interests could be closely matched.

> If you have an interest in psychology and your interest is in this aspect of psychology and this is the person who happens to be the expert in that area, there needs to be some way of connecting with that person.
>
> A mentoring program I think is really successful if you have more senior people either who are alumni of the university or they're working in the same profession you're going into or they're faculty members in the area . . . you want to go on and do your major in.

Thus, mentor and buddy programs were identified by many interviewees as key tools to facilitate meaningful experiences for students and create a personal connection with the institution. However, lack of time, insufficient money, and poor co-ordination hindered much of the programs' potential success. Nonetheless, attempts were made to create a sense of community within the bureaucracy and encourage students to form personal networks linking them to more informal communities within the institution..

III. Sense of Community

An integral component of student success and the integration of students into the university, according to Tinto (1975) is the student's sense of belonging to the informal and formal social systems both academically and personally. Throughout both the focus group and the personnel interviews, the sense of belonging to a community manifested itself in the discussions.

Administrators and faculty continually discussed how the institution needed to create more of a sense of community especially for undergraduates. According to an administrator, "our structure [here] is not necessarily set up to enhance community." One person interviewed thought this institution's "students suffer because there aren't as many communal points as there could be."

Individuals maintained that common experiences, both positive and negative, create a sense of community. These experiences create cohesion and integration within the social community providing "a sense of self and . . . a sense of others and so it becomes a point of education and a point of development."

One person spoke of Telereg (telephone registration) as dehumanizing, but also fostering community. It promotes isolation among students and does not allow students to experience the frustrations or joys with their peers when registering for courses or discovering core courses are full. One administrator felt that long line ups and mingling with other students in gyms or lecture theatres created a sense of unity and cohesion among undergraduates.

> Telereg . . . cuts down on all kinds of hassles, but what happens . . . is that . . . you register with the university in total isolation of all your peers. . . . Everyone lining up in the gym . . . was a normalizing thing. This is university. It may be a negative task we're involved in, but it's a reinforcement in the sense that we're all in this together, that this is a community.

Some individuals attributed the lack of sense of community felt by students to the changing world, times, and economy. Today's world seems fraught with greater pressures and anxieties for students. An administrator made the observation that despite technological innovations and globalization, the sense of community worldwide and within institutions seems to be diminishing:

> I think it was a better environment for students, but that's not entirely the fault of the university. I mean, the world is a different place than it was then. . . . I think it was a better place, I think there were fewer pressures, I think it was a . . . students . . . had an easier time of attaching themselves and feeling a part of the university rather than sort of passing through it.

Participants continually discussed the absence of a community at length. In addition, they made suggestions for creating or enhancing the feeling of community. For example, individuals mentioned that more extracurricular activities could be generated on campus through cultural events to draw students and other people to campus. According to one faculty member, the institution needed "more things on campus to draw people together." Other individuals maintained that some activities on campus do create a sense of community for students who seek them out, but overall these activities are not enough. One professor stated:

> I think students don't relate to the university, or to the extent that they do, they relate to things like the football team or the student newspaper or the drama club or something that really grabs their energies on campus. But that's a minority . . . and even those students still might feel a part of this part of the university, but not of the whole thing.

Some interviewees, like a liaison administrator, believed that the extracurricular activities, such as Storm the Wall, did, in fact, promote a sense of belonging. Additionally, participants concurred that more on campus events should be generated outside the classroom to engage students. By creating support networks, the university might inhibit other problems troubling students.

> To some extent if a student involves themself [sic] in a club or . . . in some kind of group like that, then they end up being luckier because they develop that support system faster. . . . I mean sitting in a lecture theatre is not the place to meet someone who's going to be your support through university.

Other individuals, particularly faculty, contended that the best way to create a sense of community for first year students was having them associated with a particular department. By saying to students,

> OK, for administrative purposes . . . you will be assigned to that department . . . someone in that department will have the responsibility for meeting with you in the week prior to the start of the September session, and you will receive some kind of induction.

In particular, smaller faculties were seen as less impersonal than larger ones.

> In smaller faculties . . . they're probably much more on a first name basis with their students. . . . I think we've got to keep trying to move things in the direction that I hope and think the small faculties are able to go, and away from the kind of direction that the large faculties probably feel that they have to go.
>
> I think in some ways it's much better to allow [mentor and other such programs] to grow up within smaller units, departments or schools . . . that take much more direct responsibility for all their students.

However, assigning first year students to a department might diminish the "shopping around for a major" students engage in before they settle on one that suits them before they find their niches in third year. They are "there to look around in the first year or two." Many recognized that having students drift unattached until third year probably causes students more problems than assigning them to a department where they may receive at least some more contact with professors, advisors, and peers. According to one professor,

> It's difficult in not declaring a major until third year; you don't really ever belong to anything 'til third year, and by the time you belong to a certain faculty, it almost seems like you have other groups and, . . . you don't really identify yourself with that faculty as much by the time you're in third year.

This same faculty member claimed that another alternative "to the large, conventional faculties" is to "create schools of cognate subjects for dealing first year [so they can] get a stronger sense of belonging somewhere . . . even though subsequently they choose to go off and register later somewhere else."

Overall though, personnel agreed that more fact to face contact between students and personnel needs to be initiated at the university for student retention and success. This could be instituted through smaller groups such as in graduate school where the graduate students form a culture of their own with accompanying folklore and wisdom. According to another professor, the student culture among peers is extremely important.

> What's really important about a graduate program that works is that there's a graduate student community . . . who can tell the first year . . . what you really do . . . how it works, [and who] the people you can talk to [are].

Another method would be to encourage contact between faculty and students. One interviewee suggested that the institution should not "let the professors go off and do more research. Make them say, "Well I'm not in the classroom, instead I'm going to interact on a much more individual level with the students." However, it was noted that some faculty do not want to take an interest in undergraduate students because students interfere with research and other priorities. Tenure and promotion is reality in a university for the professors:

> Raison d'être here is research and that's it . . . students are an inconvenience that gets in the way of publishing another paper or getting another research grant or whatever.

In addition to tenure and research issues for professors, "the difficulty with . . . a more human touch . . . is being able to devote the resources that that kind of richer detail requires."

One professor identified the need to ensure that "faculty members have the time to be able to nurture those kinds of commitments." Another professor articulated the necessary commitments of time and money resources needed to make something like a mentor program successful.

> When you're setting up a program, any kind of program, that's going to look at matching up students in the buddy system or in . . . some sort of a group to come together, there's a cost. There's a staff person who has to run that program and monitor it and the really successful programs take a lot of work.

Others suggested that the difficulty with creating a supportive and personal atmosphere at a large research institution was a question of the role and responsibilities of the university. Any incongruence between student expectations of the institution and what the institution actually provided was seen as a failure to understand the purpose of the university on the part of the students. One faculty member commented that institutions were "having increasing amounts of trouble . . . integrating students into the kind of mission about what these places are doing." As a research institution, teaching and students were not the first priority.

> This is not a small undergraduate institution, it's a major research institution and whether we like it or not, that happens to have been the thrust that the present senior administration has put on things. And there are a lot of people for whom teaching is not . . . their primary [purpose].

> The institution doesn't really work in a way that seeks to do anything positive about that process of affirming people's abilities and partly it's because we've built such a rigid, sort of impermeable barrier between the outside world and academe.

An administrator recognized that the institution would "have to value the fact that students need that support . . . before we even start to [give] it" and accept that working toward student success was legitimate undertaking for the university.

> You should start with the premise that you should improve this aspect of the university's work, that it should be more supportive, more user-friendly . . . it's going to have to have . . . that as a priority. Before you can do anything you have to get the institution to accept that responsibility in some real public way.

Another role of the institution was identified as that of service provider to a paying "client" and therefore responsible for meeting the needs of that client.

> I think it's in the universities' own interest to . . . do a better job of caring for our students. Not only are they in some crude sense our customers . . . but if we want to have sort of public support for the claims we make on the taxation system, we really should be more responsible about the fact that some students will, for a whole variety of reasons, find themselves in trouble in their first year.

Furthermore, the institution has an obligation to alert the clientele to its services in a way that first year students unfamiliar with a large bureaucracy may be encouraged to access services as they might have in smaller high school. Thus, some dropouts and potential dropouts are due to students not accessing the institutional services provided for them to successfully remain in the institution. Many students, for a variety of reasons, do not take the time and effort required to utilize the support services available to them, such as this student who "didn't think it would be worth my time" to seek help.

Some agreed that the institution had a responsibility for at least ensuring "students are made aware of the existence of a variety of programs that they [might] take advantage of. It's clearly not appropriate for it to be the individual's responsibility to seek out this kind of information." According to one administrator, it would be to the advantage of the university if students were seen to be successful.

> Where the responsibility of the institution kicks in is that we have to be here to continually remind students about what's available . . . it does the university credit to say that so many of their graduates go on to earn this amount of money or . . . enter this profession.

Others thought the institution should be primarily responsible for students' success.

> I guess I would say it's the institution's responsibility to try and make every student as successful as they could be.

> It's important for the university to create an environment that will enable the student to access resources and maximize their success. . . . The university should provide a supportive environment that facilitates success.

For some the concern with student success was "clearly a shared responsibility" between the institution and the students.

> I think the major responsibility lies on the student, but I think we have a much greater responsibility than we . . . exercise when a student . . . [asks for] help. . . . I think that we have a responsibility to be more proactive than we are.

However, for others it was "never going to be entirely the institution's responsibility or even primarily the institution's responsibility. It is primarily the student's responsibility." Many administrators felt this attitude was prevalent:

> The only way students are going to learn is by doing it on their own. We will help out where we can.

> By the time you come here you should know what you want, and we're here to . . . help you do that, but not to help you figure out what . . . it is you should be doing. I think that's really unfortunate but I think it's probably not going to change, and it may in fact get worse.

As one administrator said, "Where there's a choice, particularly . . . a choice that doesn't cost us anything, we should certainly make the choice in favour of being more supportive." However, the attitude of many students, especially first year, is that success at this university is up to the individual. Even though efforts are now being made to change this view, it is extremely difficult to do so.

> The motto . . . translated for years as "It's up to you", and then we flipped it around . . . [to] say, "It's yours". . . all these resources are here, take advantage of them. . . . But the culture has been one of it's up to you. People regarded it as an institution where you sank or swam.

Despite suggestions and the desire to create a sense of community for first year students, many interviewees asserted that it would be difficult, for they perceived the institution primarily as a non-residential and commuter institution. One woman encapsulated this thought by stating

> I think that it is such a big institution and it tends to be, although we have a large residence population, it tends to be a commuter institution. So I think building a sense of community and belonging is really a tough challenge for the institution.

With this thought in mind, the commuting student experience should be explored further. However, for those living on campus, many of the personnel lauded the residential program for the creation of a sense of community and integration for first year students. People, especially administrators, maintained that the residential experience is essential for students:

> Every student should live in residence in their first year at university because . . . having a sense of community as a first year or second year student is so vital.

Throughout the interviews, both faculty and administrators affirmed that the students' sense of community was essential for making university a meaningful personal experience. However, often the student experience did not reflect this:

> A lot of students go through the institutions and come out really disillusioned at the other end. They're brandished with a paper, but they didn't actually get much else out of the experience.

Some of the isolation and alienation can be overcome through meaningful experiences with professors. However, one administrator pointed out that first year students do not often have much personal contact with their professors. For example, one faculty member pointed this out by saying:

> There's such a huge demand on services and you're ending up in a class of 500 students. How likely is it that you're really going to meet with your professor?. . . . That's where the alienation comes in.

Part of the problem of creating meaningful university experiences for first year students is that they are in a time of turmoil and a time of trying to identify who they are as they enter the adult world. By helping students, universities encourage individuals to discover avenues for self-fulfillment. When advising students, one administrator tells them:

> I think part of what being at university is all about is figuring out what it is you really want to do . . . but I don't think people should be here just because it'll help them get a job.

Many university personnel see their roles as attempting to help students create a meaningful experience to take with them throughout their lives. As another administrator commented,

> They'll probably develop a sense of what they're going on to do beyond this and how they're going to contribute to society. So the issue is helping students develop meaning, helping them structure their expectations for what university is before they get here. Thus, the university personnel see their roles as caring helmspeople to assist first year students throughout their journeys. As a way to fulfill that role, the institution offers a number of student success courses and programs.

IV. Student Success Programs and Services

The range of programs to enhance student success is extensive. Services mentioned included those provided by the Student Resource Centre, Women Students' Office, faculty academic advising and financial aid.

The Student Resource Centre offers a wide range of services for students, from personal counselling to career advising and workshops to enhance academic success and social integration. Those faculty directly concerned with student success issues and programs were familiar with available programs.

> Last year we offered 165 different workshops . . . [on] issues from personal development, . . . career, . . . student success, . . . learning enhancement skills. . . . We now have the largest career resource library in Western Canada here. Well, we have past exams for studying purposes. . . . [And] calendars from around the world. . . . We have self-help material . . . , how to network, time management, anxiety, stress, self esteem books. . . . Then we have career information around what careers fall out of what educational backgrounds, what are the up and coming trends, what is the prediction for various occupations within career fields. We have corporations and company representatives coming on campus to recruit students for ongoing employment. . . . So that's the resource centre.

The School and College Liaison Offices also offered a variety of programs for new students.

> The mandate of this office is to provide information services and programs for high school students and college students in the Canadian system who might be interested in attending [this institution] and to assist those students who do get admitted make the transition into their program here.

In addition, some faculty were aware that

> There are programs . . . on recruitment to the university that involve . . . parent orientation[and] student orientation in various faculties; there are mentoring programs; there are residency programs; there are scholarship and student loan programs that exist.

Other programs and services mentioned include the library which "does a pretty good job of telling students how to use its services" and " within the last couple of months the computing side has made some . . . substantial changes at starting to engage students [with] this new E-Mail initiative". As one faculty member noted, "It's probably an exaggeration to say that almost all of the various kinds of retention and enhancement programs exist at this university, but a great many of them certainly do."

Faculty who had no direct link between their university responsibilities and the programs outlined above, were "woefully ignorant about what sort of things . . . [the institution] is doing. " It was suggested that "a whole host of programs that are available [but] many of them . . . are unknown" to faculty and students in part because of the large size of the institution.

> I think the university's too big. I think a lot of the problems for students have to do with the size, and the nature of the bureaucracy here, and I think it's a problem for all of us who work in it too.

This point was reiterated by another professor:

> Most students who come here find this a very big and alienating kind of environment and . . . very difficult to move around these kinds of bureaucracies and find out where exactly information can be gotten from.

Others saw the lack of integration and coordination of resources as problematic. In particular, advising was "a major problem" because "students' . . . high school experience tells them to go to the counselling office or the guidance office for program advising . . . so many students then assume that that's what we do. Well, we don't do that." Academic advising falls within the domain of the faculties while other types of students' services including personal and career counselling are located at other centres within the institution. According to one administrator,

> I think advising is a major problem. And there are a number of us that would like to see [a model] that combines academic and personal advice, but academic advising is very tightly held by the faculties, and . . . the faculties have a lot of power and influence in terms of how things are done.

A professor presented the issue from his perspective as a member of the faculty:

> The communication between the high school liaison office . . . student counselling office . . . the student resources office . . . the financial services office . . . and individual members of faculty is virtually nonexistent. I think the same to some

extent is true even within faculties. . . . There's that sense of communication is terrible.

Another faculty member agreed that there were difficulties with a decentralized model for students services.

> It . . . needs a kind of coordinated approach so that not just students but people that also are advising to or talking with students can help them to the right resources.

Inevitably inconsistencies occur in the services students receive because "[the institution] has a variety of systems, which is to say it really has no system for ensuring that within departments there are people who really are expert as advisors."

> As a result, depending upon who the student is, the department they're in, who the faculty advisor is, why they happen to be a faculty advisor, students get different services.

Because of inconsistencies between and within departments, better coordination was needed to help relieve "information overload" that results from the onslaught of pamphlets and posters faculty receive at the beginning of the term. According to one professor,

> A lot of [information] comes in a kind of blitz in late August and early September as we get across our desk a whole variety of different programs that are available, but by and large it's very uncoordinated and there is no good sense of exactly what all those programs can do.

As a solution to this problem, faculty and administrators suggested a clearinghouse is needed where "you can always get this information. . . . You've got to be able to . . . quickly identify areas, resources, etc., . . . of programs and initiatives that students can . . . follow up on." As students are bombarded with an unmanageable amount of information at the start of the academic year, they too need an information centre where they may access "quick tips" for survival.

> I'm always astounded at the number of students who come in and they've never read the calendar . . . but . . . there's such an overload of information. . . . I can understand why a lot of students . . . will skim through something and then not pick up on a lot of information that they potentially are going to need at some point.

In addition to the difficulties of coordinating and disseminating timely and useful information, some programs lacked the necessary resources to meet student demand. For one student success centre, "demand is going out the door. We don't have enough staff to . . . keep up demand; our waiting list at times is up to three weeks to see a counselor." The situation was similar at another office as two professors pointed out:

> The counselling services at the [particular office] are just totally inadequate and the counselling services, generally, are totally inadequate. I mean, they have waiting lists . . .
>
> [The centre] doesn't have the resources to deal with the amount of students coming in now, . . . there's a two or three week waiting list to get . . . in to see anyone. . . . So it almost is to the point that I feel they don't want to advertise or make themselves more well-known because they can hardly deal with what they've got.

These efforts notwithstanding, it was recognized that resources were "so limited that if many more students chose to access these services, we wouldn't be able to provide them." Nonetheless, "just like . . . [the institutional] admission process has to be driven by some economic realities, so . . . support of students has to be driven by those same realities."

However, the problem of accessing counselling services was recognized and positive steps were being taken to alleviate the problem. In particular, hours had been altered to better fit student schedules so that a counselor was available at all times in case of an emergency. Furthermore, a careful screening process was implemented to ensure that priority needs were met while those that could be either dealt with more leisurely or within a group situation were arranged accordingly.

One administrator felt that the creative use of technology could be one way to deal with shrinking resources. Also, the institution should explore the use of cutting edge communications technology to free professors to team teach larger sections or courses.

> Maybe we should be fairly aggressive about trying to make technology work and . . . leverage . . . productivity through the use of technology . . . with the specific aim . . . to have more personalized service where it counts.

Suggestions were made about how to further improve student success and retention. For example, some suggested that the institution look closely and "at least experiment . . . on one of [the] programs" to enhance student success used in the colleges. A week long compulsory course that "will introduce you to the program and the university [that will] not be stigmatizing. . . because everyone has to do it" was another possible means of enhancing student success. Curriculum revision was also suggested by professors:

> One of the ideas . . . is to offer either a compulsory non-credit course or a credit course that focuses on . . . giv[ing] people a sense of just how the university works, how it operates, what's it all about .. what they now see their missions as being and where each individual fits within the whole scheme of things.

The use of co-operative education programs was mentioned as a way making the university experience more valuable for students as they would "give [students] a sense of purpose . . . [and] a sense of what [they] want to do." Although "a lot of people who have gone through co-op programs or work experience programs have awfully good things to say about them," it was recognized that problems of introducing co-operative education on a large scale would be "massive."

> There are costs and there's a tremendous inertia in an institution and I think a snobbery too that sees this kind of activity as somehow less worthy than making students keep their noses in books.

Financial aid was another area where limited resources were considered problematic. A task force review revealed that the institution's "student aid program should be in the middle of the Canadian student aid programs." However, programs to assist students were at the bottom when compared with the institutional assistance other universities across Canada were able to provide their students. One administrator felt that awards were woefully insufficient to meet students' basic needs.

> A student can't look at a student loan form and expect that that student loan is going to provide them with the money that they need.

Accordingly, administrators noted a need to "increase the levels that are provided within the student loan program." Alternatives to loans, such as "more bursaries rather than scholarships" needed to be re-examined, and the "repayment schedules that are . . . taken out of taxes" should be considered in order to alleviate some of the pressure associated with students' debt. According to several administrators,

> Those that are here are carrying a significant debt load and they're also aware that the economy is so poor that the chances of them getting a good paying job in their field when they graduate are not wonderful any more. So I think that brings a lot of pressure to bear.
>
> On the other hand, if you come out with a $20,000 student loan at the end of that now, that's another kind of pressure. . . . So I think the stress that students are under today
> . . . we often don't take into account.

One of the institutional personnel interviewed suggested that the "provincial government needs to look [again] at some form of a grant system" that used to exist in British Columbia. But, "the governments are not always at the forefront of doing creative, helpful things. . . .There are some real limitations for government paid programs and . . . those limitations . . . naturally affect the way the Awards Office does business." In addition:

> We find that we're in a position where the constraints on a staff member and an office are not constraints that the university has anything to do with . . . because it's somebody else's program.

Overall, faculty, administrators, and support staff alike are aware that novel ideas are needed for student success, programming, and access.

V. Evaluation

As one of the institutional personnel noted, "If you're spending resources on something, I think you need to try and get some kind of sense of whether it's having any impact." However, a paucity of research on student needs or effectiveness of programs was evident to many administrators:.

> There is little in the way of research as such that I'm aware of.
>
> I don't think the . . . to my knowledge there has not been a specific set of evaluations of student finance, for example, here or the mentoring programs here, etc., that are research-oriented.

Nonetheless, "There are a variety of ways that . . . programs themselves try to get some sense of their effectiveness." The following examples demonstrate the range and nature of much of the evaluation.

> Every student who attends orientation is asked to complete an evaluation before they leave and the moms and dads that come to the parent program are asked to do that as well. And we use a . . . scale in some cases and just open ended questions.
>
> We have done a focus group with some students that attended orientation . . . and just asked them, "Now that you've been here for six weeks, how was the orientation, reflecting back on it?"
>
> With . . . [one institutional] program, we . . . sent out an evaluation form to everyone that had attended and invited them to send comments back. . . . So there's that kind of assessment that is done.

The Students' Resource Centre hired a "senior staff member whose responsibility is to coordinate our efforts in evaluation and investigative studies for one year." And finally, the graduate program used an exit survey to question students about their satisfaction with aspects of their education and the institution, the activities they participated in, and their use of financial resources.

Given the general lack of substantial research at this institution, in an effort to "gather information about the study body," at the time of the interviews, a collaborative research project was underway. Its purpose is to provide a comparative snap-shot of the undergraduate experience among a number of universities.

> We're working on it in cooperation with some of the Western universities, we're going to try and see if we can run a survey that's parallel, so that we can actually compare not only over time here, but we can compare between institutions.

Many feel that such research is timely as the institution attempts to answer the demands from students, the public and government. Changing admission requirements in the form of increased grade point averages accompanied by concerns with accessibility, the emergence of new institutions, are all impacting on the institution.

VI. University Access

Due to changing demographics and views of lifelong education, more and more individuals, both young and mature, are attending post-secondary institutions. Thus, enormous demands are being put on access to these educational sites. With government cutbacks and lack of available spaces, universities are under more pressure to increase enrolments. Coupled with increased demand is the belief, in some cases, by local tax payers in a university community that their sons and daughters are entitled to attend the local university just by virtue of living in the town. According to one administrator these people ignore entrance criteria and demand entry, especially if the university is prestigious. He maintained that the question to ask is not whether everyone can gain access to the local university within the community, but,

> "Is there a place for every qualified student, somewhere?" . . . The answer to that question is yes, but at what cost do people . . . take those places. . . . I think we'll have to come around to accepting that [students must go where the places are even if that means going to Prince George from the Lower Mainland].

Furthermore, an administrator confirmed this view:

> We will . . . have to protect our ability to provide a quality education, and if the resources aren't there, I think you have to limit enrolment to maintain quality.

Other measures will be taken to maintain enrolments at universities. At this site, one faculty member commented:

> Every signal that I get at the moment is suggesting that this university has to put a cap on its enrolment, . . . and that's been done with drastic consequences as GPAs are . . . going through the roof.

Due to increased demand for university spaces, admission GPAs have risen significantly. In fact, some feel that they have become inflated. Faculty and administrators indicate that the GPA is problematic, but at present it appears to be the most equitable criterion:

> The whole notion of GPA as being the standard by which people get in . . . is a toughie [because] . . . we don't have the money, the infrastructure to do interviews, to consider other aspects.

Faculty and administrators would like to see more emphasis placed on students' outside commitments as well as involvement with the local community in addition to the interview. However, the question still remains one of availability of seats within the current educational setting. Consequently, when admissions and registration personnel are dealing with applications in the thousands from all over Canada and the world, GPA seems a fair and equitable basis for entry into first year according to registrar personnel:

> You've got to make the rules very clear. I don't think using GPA is necessarily better than some other system. But it does have the great advantage that we can actually do it and with 25,000 undergraduate applicants, that is a non-trivial issue.

Despite the apparent fairness of the GPA, other issues have arisen. For example, entry GPAs are climbing and are becoming inflated in order to limit burgeoning demand in enrolments. This even causes problems when institutions have to decide between top students possessing GPAs with differences of only .01 or .25. One administrator commented:

> As you approach 4.0 . . . it gets less and less reasonable to say, "OK, this student had 3.91, this one had 3.90, the cut-off was 3.91 so one is in and one is out."

According to faculty and those administrators in close contact with students, the "artificially" inflated GPA is causing other problems, such as weeding out well rounded students who could make a significant contribution to the university and later to society.

> A lot of time you're left with people who maybe are so focused on school in order to get those marks that they lack a lot of other things that bring important factors to a profession.

In addition to "weeding out" extremely capable students, high GPAs are biased against mature and women students, for these people may have been in the workforce or in the home for many years. Consequently, they do not possess GPAs for entry into first year. As one professor noted, a high GPA is "okay . . . as long as we also allow mature students to come in under other conditions."

Other issues surrounding the GPA include high school students forgoing social activities in anticipation of the stiff competition and admission criteria in the most desirable universities.

> Many students in high school now are dropping participation in sports or clubs or . . . not [taking an] interesting elective . . . because they are so focused on trying to get their grades up . . . because they know that the GPA is going to affect which institution they get into.

Recently though, other alternatives have become available to those students not qualifying for prestigious universities or seeking a more intimate or local educational experience.

Despite the limited access to some of the more prestigious institutions, alternatives are available today throughout British Columbia for students seeking to further their education. This was not the case twenty years ago. New forms of access have emerged through the conversion of colleges into degree granting university colleges and the building of the University of Northern British Columbia. Overall, faculty and administrators welcomed the establishment of the university colleges. They indicated that greater access is afforded students; individual's lifestyles are taken into account, thus making a university degree possible for those who have other commitments; and, finally, they maintained that the credibility of the institutions would grow with time.

The university colleges provide greater access for those who may not be able to afford university. Additionally, they open access for those individuals who may not have had the necessary GPA to enter into one of the larger universities:

> I think it (GPA) also gives justification for . . . the college universities . . . because it expands access through that type of a system to a university degree.

Moreover, these institutions could serve as a less expensive training ground to prepare students unsure of their futures for later enrolment into the big universities. As one administrator noted,

> I think that for those who cannot afford it, this is the first step to accessing that basic level of education that I think people need today in order to be competitive in our world market.

Both administrators and faculty believe that the university colleges provide access to geographic locations that otherwise would not have a post-secondary institution. One professor commented:

> I think it's great because it's in the interior, and I don't think you should have to move to Vancouver or Victoria if you happen to live in . . . Kelowna or something.

Furthermore, participants discussed that now individuals would not have to give up or disrupt their lifestyles anymore to obtain a university education as they often did in the past "because it does open opportunities to a large range of people who have hitherto found the prospect of coming to the Lower Mainland . . . pretty difficult." Sometimes, capable people would not forfeit lifestyle, job, or family; thus, they denied themselves the opportunity to obtain a degree to give credibility to their experience or expertise.

Despite university personnel's approval of the university college system, they offered a number of cautions. Many were concerned about the credibility of the institutions.

> I think the only question there really is we want to try to ensure that they don't become seen as kind of second class universities.

To prevent this, personnel, as exemplified by one professor, contended that the university colleges should ensure they maintain contact with older, well-established institutions:

> I just hope that . . . they stay linked to existing universities, and the reason for saying this is that if they don't . . . they're going to find themselves with serious problems of credibility.

One further caution was the concern with the perception that a degree from a university college would be the same as a degree from the parent institution. According to one administrator,

> I have a feeling that the perceptions in the community is that a degree from Okanagan University College in co-operation with the University of Victoria is not as good as a U-Vic degree.

Despite these cautions, the interviewees were very supportive of the establishment of alternate degree-granting post-secondary institutions.

Although supportive of the university colleges, university personnel were extremely sceptical about the utility of creating the University of Northern B.C. Many see this university as a drain on the resources available for post-secondary institutions. As one professor noted,

> The . . . only problem is if resources are being drained, and we're all being squeezed too much so . . . the University of Northern British Columbia is another question because that's drained so many resources in a way that I don't think is very rational to do.

Furthermore, individuals felt that the University of Northern B.C. was not a realistic move as the College of New Caledonia could have been converted into a university college as had been done with so many other colleges within the province. According to one professor,

> It's very costly to set up a new university . . . I'm not sure that that was the wisest financial decision, to create a four-year university with graduate studies parallel to a two-year college that's just down the road. . . . It was a political decision.

Despite high GPAs, entrance criteria, and enrollments, perhaps access is not as great an issue as the community believes it to be. After all, compared with twenty years ago, more colleges, university colleges, and private institutions, and even universities have emerged within British Columbia to meet some of the ever-growing demands for lifelong education. Maybe, with the new technological and distance education and the declining birth rates access to first year will not be the issue -- but graduate studies will be. Overall though, universities, like the newer institutions, despite their reputations will need to become more flexible and listen to the demands of their clientele -- the student.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, students success is a complicated concept to define, difficult to ensure and problematic to measure. All interviewees showed concern for first year (and other) students to navigate successfully a large university. However, they also recognized that there must be a balance between student needs, whether they be in counselling and advising, academic support or the ephemeral need to "belong," and the logistical realities of a large operating institution. Similar to the first year focus group students, the interviewees reflected on their own institutional isolation from one another. Also reflected in the sentiments from the students was the gap between knowing certain programs existed, obtaining information about them, and assisting students to access them.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to conduct an action research project with small groups of students at three post-secondary institutions (one community college, one university-college, and one university). Over the course of the first academic semester, weekly or bi-weekly focus group sessions were held with the same 5-8 first year students at each of the three sites. Although each focus group was small, participants were able to share their own experiences and those of their first year peers in negotiating their first term of post-secondary education. Also, by employing an action research approach with small groups of students, the researchers and participants were able to witness and record the transformation of individuals' thriving and surviving mechanisms. Each group evolved over the course of the first semester, in varying degrees, as a community of support, a nexus for problem solving, and as a network for action.

Analyses of student focus group data revealed that, in general, the first term at a college, university college, or university, was not easy for students. Most participants perceived first year -- particularly the first semester -- as "a test" they were required to survive. Many were overwhelmed by the workload, abundance of information, lack of time, and expectations from faculty. Those students entering directly from high school were perplexed and baffled at the difference in assignments, grade allocation, and emphasis on plagiarism. Many participants felt helpless and powerless, and expressed that they did not even know what they did not know, or what questions to ask for help. Initially, they felt "voiceless" because "we're only first year students." In addition, students experienced family, work, and social demands, which required negotiation and compromise. The students' abilities to "juggle" these demands depended upon their available support networks both within and outside the institution.

For all three groups of students, considerable discrepancy existed between what they had expected -- from the institution, their instructors and their program. For the university group, all above average students out of high school, failure was a new experience. They did not understand what it meant to fail or what the consequences were. For the university college students, a similar discrepancy existed between their previous school experiences and the quality and quantity of work they were required to complete at the university college. This group was overwhelmed by the emphasis on research and theory and they found it necessary to alter how they divided time between tasks as they had not realized the commitment necessary to be successful. Community college students were also surprised at the program content and standard of academic work required. They too had conflicting expectations based on previous high school experiences.

As reported experiences of students demonstrate, not knowing what to do or where to go for help is only part of the difficulty students face. The reality of maneuvering through the institution is far more complex as students encounter countervailing forces such as unhelpful and curt staff, limited access to or absence of materials, and reluctance to utilize existing resources. Sometimes students did not know what resources the institution offered; in other instances, utilizing resources was resisted because they did not fit the needs of the students.

With all three institutional examples presented above, there is a dynamic relationship between the students and their instructors. At the university site, students were ready to learn but were hindered by inappropriate classroom behavior by instructors or perceived poor quality of teaching. At the university college, students' reluctance to ask questions led to misunderstanding and lack of communication. This resulted in a great deal of stress for the students and the necessity to re-do some course requirements. At the college site, student attitudes and perceptions about the role and authority of instructors prevented them from seeking the help they needed.

Despite overt and covert efforts by faculty, administrators, and staff in promoting "success" programs, the data demonstrated a difference between ***availability*** and ***accessibility***. For example, although writing centres, student counselling, and "success" workshops were readily available, participants were reluctant to take the initiative to utilize these resources. Reasons for this unwillingness included time constraints, fear of asking "stupid" questions, concerns about repercussions, ignorance of actual services provided, and an aversion to "bothering busy people."

Interviews with institutional personnel revealed, first, that at all three institutions personnel perceived student success to be a multi-dimensional concept that included academic success, earning a credential, "getting a job," "shopping around," "stopping out" or withdrawal. Although the importance of viewing success from the point of view of the student was highlighted, student success defined as retention was, at all institutions, a "bottom line" concern as ever-increasing limits of resources and demands for accountability tended to place issues of retention and attrition ahead of the interests of students.

Second, both the college and university college personnel asserted that they offered a "helping hand" approach for students. However, university personnel, despite the fact that most students entered with GPAs of 3.0 and above, maintained that the university adheres to a "weeding out" approach. Third, all institutional personnel contended that students need to be made aware of "success" services prior to the development of a crisis situation. Finally, some administrators and faculty acknowledge that faculty play an even greater role in a first year student's success than had been previously anticipated.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the three first year student focus groups and from our interviews with the respective institutional personnel, justify a number of conclusions. First, despite having in place comprehensive programs and services to assist students with their first year, students at all institutions were either reluctant or unable to access those resources. Second, given the availability of resources, personnel at all institutions assumed students could and would make use of them, even though this was often not so. Finally, the overwhelming feeling experienced by students in all the focus groups was one of powerlessness and isolation.

Given the experiences of the students in this study, faculty must understand the impact they have on first year students. Faculty are perceived as powerful authority figures. For the young university student or the returning older student, there is much at stake in their academic endeavours. That faculty -- through insensitivity, benign neglect, overt sexism, "power tripping," or poor andragogy -- can devastate first year students' confidence, must be recognized. The ability or willingness of students to approach teachers in the face of such experiences, was according to this study, seriously curtailed. It is equally important for faculty to acknowledge the positive impact they can have on students and hence, their own distinctive role in overall student success in the post-secondary institutions.

The impact of staff and administration on student success also deserves be recognized. Discouragement of student efforts to use institutional resources takes many forms, including rude, intimidating or inadequately trained staff: again, this makes the accessibility of resources problematic for students. This study demonstrated too that even when students are encouraged to make use of services (through brochures, poster advertising, or classroom announcements, as was done for example with the university college writing centre), the active, polite, and personal involvement of staff can be a more effective approach. The role they play in ensuring student involvement with the institution and its programmes was shown to be substantial.

Obviously, student success goes well beyond skills such as utilizing established resources, learning the system or taking success courses. A dynamic relationship exists between students as agents within the institution and the institution (its people, policies and practices) itself. It is crucial for post-secondary institutions to understand and act upon the sorts of real barriers to success revealed in our discussions with students. For example, limited library resources and ignorant staff pose a real obstacle. In this instance, strategies such as providing for the transferability of library cards and ensuring adequately trained staff will help make the library more user friendly. It is also important that institutions recognize the agency-structure dynamic that acts in many ways to shape student experience and hence student success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This action research project has implications for both policy and practice. First, although most institutions currently provide "success" services, more effort is required for students to utilize these resources. Students do not need "hand-holding"; however, they do require "hands-on" direction. Second, an across the curriculum approach could help prevent students from reaching a crisis situation. Third, faculty need to be educated about the "success" resources available. Also, since faculty may be the only institutional contact students have, they play an especially crucial role in students' lives. Rather than an information blitz at the beginning of the term an ongoing communicative process within the institution is essential. Finally, first year students need to feel a sense of belonging. This could be provided by creating an environment where students could begin forming networks and support systems with faculty and peers to create their own learning culture. Perhaps the most important point for both students and personnel to remember is that a successful experience is a joint and interactive process where both the first year students and institution personnel have a responsibility to participate as partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the experience of having participated in the groups, which included documenting the dialogue and facilitating action, we offer the following recommendations to post-secondary personnel who are interested in the success of their first year students:

Faculty MUST understand the impact they have on first year students. Faculty are perceived as figures of authority who hold considerable power. For the young university student or the returning older student, much is at stake in their academic endeavours. That faculty -- through insensitivity, benign neglect, overt sexism, "power tripping", or poor andragogy -- can devastate first year students' confidence in their own abilities, must be recognized. It is equally important for faculty to recognize the positive impact they can have on students and hence, their role in overall student success in the post-secondary system.

"Built in" and therefore mandatory "success" strategies (assignments/workshops/lectures) appear to be preferable to add-on models of "success." Certain resources and skills are basic to the success of first year students. Library, writing and research skills are critical and should be embedded within each course and program in an "across the curriculum" approach.

"Human contact" is essential. Reaching out, by individual post-secondary personnel, on an individual basis, will have much more of an impact on students' lives than will "non- human" approaches. Also, students need to be included in the planning of student success programs. A "top down" approach is antithetical to student success. Concerns and worries need to be heard informally - not just through counsellors, committees, or the institution.

Students need concrete and accurate answers to questions and concerns. Frequently asked questions include: the difference between courses listed as required, recommended and preferred; the difference between courses offered each term as opposed to all courses listed in calendars; what GPA and CGPA mean; what a credit is; the nature of examinations and evaluations; and information on policies such as plagiarism.

It is important to realize the limitations of student handbooks. Although student handbooks provide a summary of available resources, the information is either not detailed enough to be useful, or turgid and user-unfriendly.

Peer networking is a powerful strategy. One approach could be to pair first year students with senior students. Senior students could recount their successes, failures and experiences. The researcher at the university site adopted this approach. As a graduate of the university, she had first hand experience with campus life. By sharing her experiences, she was able to allay fears and demonstrate to each student that she or he was not alone. However, resources are required to encourage and sustain peer networking practices. Also, peer networking should be one of many resources available to students.

Student success goes beyond skills such as negotiating library, learning the system and taking skills or success courses. Strategies that rely on promoting student motivation -- including networking and bonds with other students, and caring instructors -- will help students discover new insights about themselves and facilitate their ability to accomplish difficult tasks. Communication among students and staff, instructors and peers is crucial.

It is critical for post-secondary institutions to realize and act upon some of the real barriers to success. These include limited library resources, access to accurate information, sound advising, and access to resources beyond the traditional "9 to 5" work day.

Consider educating every faculty member to be an action researcher. That is, not only should faculty impart knowledge in the classroom, but they should also assume the role of facilitator to assist students to find and use their "voices", identify concerns and issues, and act to improve the post-secondary experience.

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